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Abolition: A New Paradigm for Reform

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Criminology, Law and Society

by

Marina Bell

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Elliott Currie, Chair
Associate Professor Judah Schept
Assistant Professor Ana Muñiz
Assistant Professor Christopher Seeds

2021

DEDICATION

To all those whose lives are, and have been, impacted by the devastations of the carceral state. And to all those—past, present, and future—who fight for abolition and building a better world.

And for my Nana, for being the brightest light in my life, always.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

VITAE

MARINA BELL

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Criminology, Law & Society, **University of California**, Irvine, CA   Spring 2021
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M.A. Humanities (*magna cum laude*), **University of Chicago**, Chicago, IL   Spring 2010
B.A. Philosophy (*magna cum laude*), **Mills College**, Oakland, CA   Spring 2008

PUBLICATIONS

Bell, M. (2020). Abolition: A New Paradigm for Reform. *Law and Social Inquiry*, 1-37.
Bell, M. (2020). Book Review: *Homeward* by Bruce Western. *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict and World Order*. 43(2-3), 185-191.

FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, AND AWARDS

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2020	**Dean's Quarterly Fellowship**, University of California, Irvine
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2020	**Professional Development Fellowship**, University of California, Irvine
2017-2018	**Beyond the Bars LA Fellow**, University of California, Los Angeles
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ACADEMIC POSITIONS

Assistant Professor, Dominican University, Chicago, IL   8/2021
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Fall 2020	Sociology of Law (remote instruction)
Fall 2019	Criminological Theory
Summer 2019	Sociology of Law
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Spring 2020	Sentencing and Corrections, Master of Advanced Study course (remote instruction), Professor Susan Turner
Winter 2019	Foundations of Criminology, Law and Society, Professor Hillary Berk
Fall 2018	American Law, Professor Hillary Berk
Spring 2018	Introduction to Criminology, Law and Society, Professor Ana Muñiz
Winter 2018	Social Control of Delinquency, Professor Geoff Ward
Fall 2017	Sociology of Law, Professor Carroll Seron
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Winter 2017	Prisons, Punishment, and Corrections, Professor Susan Turner
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Fall 2014	Crime and Public Policy, Professor Elliott Currie
Spring 2014	Introduction to Criminology, Law and Society, Professor Donna Schuele
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Fall 2013	Introduction to Criminology, Law and Society, Professor Teresa Dalton

Instructor, Osher Foundation for Lifelong Learning, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA
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RESEARCH

2020 Summer   **Research Assistant**, University of California, Irvine, Irvine CA
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2015-2018   **Research Assistant**, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA
Center for Evidence-Based Corrections: Arts in Corrections Project
PI: Professor Susan Turner
2014   **Research Assistant**, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA
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PRESENTATIONS
Invited Presentations
2020   *Coalition-Centered Advocacy: Prison Abolition*, Panelist, 2020 National Lawyers Guild Far West Regional Disorientation
2018   *Reformist Failures, Abolitionist Solutions*, Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reform: 21st Century Solutions to 20th Century Problems, Hosted by the Prison University Project, San Quentin State Prison, October 2018
2018   *Abolition as a Solution to Negative Consequences of Reentry Reform*, Unintended: The Promises and Perils of Criminal Justice Reform, Princeton University

Organized Panels
2017   *Re-entry*, Beyond the Bars LA, University of California, Los Angeles. Panelists: Scott Budnick, Anti-Recidivism Coalition; Terri McDonald, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department; Tyrone Hardison, Learn Everything About the Parole Process

Presentations
2019   *Abolition: A New Paradigm for Reform*, American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting
2018   *Approaching Reform Failures Through an Abolitionist Lens*, Law, Society and Culture's Socio-Legal Studies Workshop, UC Irvine Law School
2018   *From Reentry to Abolition: Reform Failures through an Abolitionist Theoretical Framework*, Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting
2018   *Assessing Failures in Reentry and Rehabilitation Reform*, Introduction to Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine. Professor Ana Muñiz
2016   *Arts-In-Corrections: Beyond Traditional Rehabilitative Programming*, American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting
2015   *Effecting Real Change in Prisoner Reintegration: A Challenge to Prevailing Assumptions in Research and in the Public Sphere*. Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting
2014   *Prison Literature & Teaching College at San Quentin State Prison*. Introduction to Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine. Professor Donna Schuele, Irvine, CA
2010   *Know With Feeling: The Epistemological Function of the Emotions and Their Role in the Philosophy of William James*. Mills College, Oakland, CA

Workshops

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ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIPS
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Law and Society Association, joined 2016
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Underground Scholars Initiative, joined 2018

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2020 - 2021	**Work Group Member**, Evaluating Faculty Contributions to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Dismantling Systemic Racism Work Groups, UCI End Racism Initiative, University of California, Irvine
2020 - 2021	**Co-organizer**, Imagining Abolition: Beyond Prisons, Wars, and Borders, international conference
2020 - 2021	**Community Engagement Committee Co-Chair**, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine
2018 - 2019	**Graduate Student Representative**, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine
2019	**Co-organizer**, Prospective Student Recruitment Weekend, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine
2018	**Co-organizer**, Underground Scholars, "From Prison to Education: 4 Formerly Incarcerated UC Students Speak Their Stories." Inaugural Underground Scholars UCI Chapter event.
2018	**Co-organizer**, Underground Scholars, "From Incarceration to Education." Film screening and formerly incarcerated student panel, University of California, Irvine
2018	**Panelist**, Comprehensive Exam Student Experiences Panel, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine
2017	**Panelist**, 2nd Annual Social Justice Research Symposium, "Graduate School Applications 101." University of California, Irvine

Professional and Community Service
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2018 - Present Orange, CA	**Co-founder and Steering Committee Member**, Transforming Justice Orange County,
2018	**Ad hoc Reviewer:** *Law & Policy*
2011 - 2012	**Reentry Advisor**, California Reentry Program, San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA
2011	**Writing Tutor**, Prison University Project, San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The catastrophic failure of the prison system in the United States has prompted a shift in criminal punishment system rhetoric and policy toward reform. Numerous programs and initiatives facilitate reentry for the hundreds of thousands of individuals coming out of prison every year, but these and other reforms remain problematic. They do little to improve the social and material conditions of those attempting to reintegrate. By failing to question the social, historical, political, and economic conditions of criminal system problems, they reproduce the oppressive social conditions that they are intended to address. This dissertation diagnoses several major issues with conventional reform efforts in rehabilitation and reentry scholarship and praxis, and argues that what is needed is not further attempts to *improve* these reforms, but to approach these problems through an abolitionist lens. An abolitionist frame, I suggest, is particularly useful in articulating suggestions for change. I apply an abolitionist analysis to an examination of reentry, and through a comparative case study of traditional reentry approaches and abolitionist ones, I illustrate how abolitionism helps to diagnose problematic reentry reforms and how an abolitionist approach to reentry can address these issues in a more effective, profound, and enduring way. Then, I engage thoroughly with abolitionism, taking stock of its historical legacies, exploring and engaging with major debates, critiques, tensions, and challenges in abolitionist thought, to construct an abolitionist vision, and articulate concrete strategies for approaching problems of crime, inequality, and injustice. This vision provides an understanding of what it means to approach such problems from an abolitionist point of view beyond reentry, and a guiding logic for evaluating whether reforms are likely to reproduce major social issues, or contribute to effective and enduring solutions that challenge the carceral paradigm, and bring about conditions of equity, justice, and repair, and a future without need of carceral systems.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The prison experiment in America has been a catastrophic failure. This idea has begun gaining traction in American public consciousness, as evidenced by recent reform trends in criminal punishment policies and rhetoric. Prisons exist, allegedly, to reduce crime, to create accountability, and to improve public safety. More than ample evidence demonstrates that they do none of these things, and in fact often exacerbate the very conditions they are supposed to address. With attention in policy, research, and on-the-ground efforts now purportedly moving toward rehabilitation and reentry in light of this evidence, the gravity of the reentry issue has become increasingly salient. As 95% of the prison population is currently being released across the country at a rate of over six hundred thousand a year, it has become indefensible to ignore the fact that when we send people to prison, with few exceptions, they all come back (Travis, 2005, p. xxi). In response, numerous programs and initiatives have been put into place to facilitate reentry for individuals coming out of prison.[1] Despite these efforts, however, individuals attempting to reintegrate after release continue to face debilitating obstacles, with recidivism

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[1] A note on language: I have made some deliberate omissions and substitutions in my use of language throughout this work that are worth noting, for one because they may appear odd to the reader and deserving of some explanation, but more importantly because of the ethical stance they entail. Firstly, because it is my position that there is very little that the prison/punishment system does that can be called "justice," I do not call it the "criminal justice system." I instead use the term "criminal punishment system." Secondly, it is common throughout scholarly and other work on the subjects of prisons and the criminal punishment system to refer to those who go through that system as "offenders," "prisoners," "inmates," "parolees," etc. I refer to these individuals simply as "people in prison," "people released from prison," or "incarcerated people" and "formerly incarcerated people." In line with the "person first" literature used by many social justice advocacy groups (Agid, Berndt, Herzing, and Wohlfeiler, n.d.; Ellis, n.d.; Hickman, 2015; La Vigne, 2016), I do this in order to illustrate my stance that they are *people* first and foremost, because I believe it is not helpful to the causes many of us advance in taking up these subjects to understand the master status of these individuals as "inmates," or "offenders." I do this also because in my conversations with formerly incarcerated people I have come to understand that these terms have particular meanings that are distinct from one another for people who have done time. A "convict" is different from an "inmate," for instance. While these distinctions may seem to have little relevance to academics who have not been incarcerated, to the extent that I intend for my work as a scholar to create space for directly impacted people to be central to the conversation on these subjects—scholarly and otherwise—I choose to respect these distinctions, even if I, as a person who identifies as system-impacted but has never been incarcerated, cannot fully appreciate their significance.

rates still sometimes comparable to what they were at the peak of the punitive era (Durose, Cooper, and Snyder, 2014; Jonson and Cullen, 2015; Langan and Levin, 2002).

In this dissertation, I diagnose several significant problems with major reform efforts in rehabilitation and reentry, and I argue that what is needed is not further attempts to *improve* these reforms, but to approach these problems through an abolitionist[2] lens. In the conversation about solutions to criminal punishment system problems, Jeremy Travis puts forward the notion of using reentry as an orientation for theory as well as praxis, as "a prism to refract, in new ways, some age-old debates in the criminal justice field" (Travis, 2005, p. xxii). Similarly, in McLeod's treatment of diversion courts (2012), she employs decarceration as a theoretical lens to cognitively reframe understandings of crime and punishment, and help facilitate more profound systemic transformation in criminal law administration than is currently offered by this attempted alternative. In an fashion analogous to these two scholars, I propose an abolitionist framework as a theoretical orientation through which to articulate solutions and alternatives in theory, research, and praxis. I define abolitionism as the goal of extirpating carceral institutions, and replacing them with nonpunitive ways of dealing with harm that empower rather than oppress marginalized people and communities, to give us a world where "everyone has their needs met, where…everyone is free, and where human disposability is unimaginable" (Kaba, 2021, p. xx).

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[2] I have observed a frequent, and warranted, tendency of individuals who are of black and African descent, who are deeply immersed in black radical traditions, to critique non-black abolitionists for failing to adequately situate their analysis in these traditions, or to credit the unquantifiable amount of labor that black and African descended people—particularly black women—have performed, and the irreparable violence and loss of life they have endured, that has provided the abolitionist framework that many non-black people now use. As a person of privilege who is descended from white, European, settler-colonialists, I am palpably aware of my positionality. I do my utmost to constantly exercise awareness of how the forces of white supremacy, patriarchy, imperialism, and settler-colonialism operate to my benefit—in addition to influencing my own thinking, behavior, attitudes, and perspectives. I strive to constantly remain open to being challenged, critiqued, and humbled by black and African radical perspectives, to which abolition is greatly indebted. This learning process is something I do not consider to ever be completable. I have done my best in this dissertation to give credit to that tradition, that labor, that endured violence and loss of life. However, especially given that this dissertation will be a mere snapshot of one stage in my social and political education, and decolonial un-learning, I acknowledge that I will inevitably fall short, and thus I leave myself, and the perspectives I advance here, open to critique. I also acknowledge that my perspective as a non-black, non-indigenous, non-person of color, will be inherently limited.

An abolitionist frame, I suggest, is particularly useful in thinking about and articulating

suggestions for change and preferable to a "reformist reform"[3], or carceral reform approach.

The first part of this dissertation looks at major reforms in reentry and rehabilitation and

examines how they are irreparably problematic. I argue that their almost exclusive focus on the

individual level—incarcerated individuals and those transitioning out—rather than structural

levels, greatly limits their ability to effect genuine change. Mainstream and traditional reentry

and rehabilitation interventions target incarcerated and recently incarcerated people without

questioning or critically engaging with the social, historical, political, and economic contexts that

have brought about the dire conditions of criminal punishment in the United States. Although

there are structural as well as individual levels of crime causation, extant solutions, by and large,

do not address the former, and therefore will never sufficiently address the problems plaguing

reentry. Additionally, the structure and approach of these programs tends to create a very low

standard and expectation for the quality of life for targeted populations, the outcome of this being

that individuals who complete these programs remain trapped in circumstances of poverty and

deprivation that tend to lead people to crime in the first place. I argue that because of these

problems, not only will these mainstream "solutions" be limited in their ability to bring about

effective change, but they can, and do, reproduce the oppressive and unjust social conditions

they aim to address.

In the latter part of this dissertation, I explore the abolitionist perspective and look at how

it is uniquely useful for grappling with the issues surrounding reentry, and I describe what a truly

reintegrative approach grounded in an abolitionist framework would look like. I focus on several

reasons why reentry problems and the reforms intended to address them are best approached

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[3] This refers to Andre Gorz's (1967) distinction between "reformist reforms" and "non-reformist reforms," which I discuss in more detail further on. I also refer to these as carceral or abolitionist reforms.

through an abolitionist frame. Firstly, the problems obstructing reintegration and effective interventions are rooted in deep structural inadequacies that reform alone will not address, and an abolitionist perspective necessitates attention to root causes in a way that a traditional reform approach does not. Unlike mainstream rehabilitation and reentry efforts, the abolitionist perspective is characterized by its challenge to the social, historical, political, and economic sources of criminal punishment system problems, as well as their racializing, oppressive, and exploitative power dynamics and impacts. As a number of legal scholars note, abolitionism also challenges traditional legal conceptions of justice, which are linked to liberal and progressive narratives of reform that ultimately serve to legitimate, strengthen, and expand carceral power and violence (Akbar, 2018; Butts and Akbar, 2017; McLeod, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019; Spade, 2012).

Secondly, an abolitionist perspective allows for the possibility of thinking about alternative conceptions of responsibility, reintegration, justice, safety, and accountability, and who should be defining these terms and taking the lead on proposing and enacting solutions. It allows us to get out from under the constraints of how these concepts are understood within the framework of our current system, in which incarceration is thought of as an acceptable way to deal with social problems.

Third, some argue that the current punishment system is not broken, but is operating exactly as it is supposed to—purposefully working against the interests of marginalized groups (Butts and Akbar, 2017; Karakatsanis, 2019). These critics argue that even under ideal conditions, we simply cannot expect this system to be just, fair, or humane. However, the basic moral orientation that human beings should not be kept in cages—especially in the systematically discriminatory and violent way we do this in America—is alarmingly absent from

even the most well-intentioned policy conversations. For this reason, an "abolitionist ethic" (McLeod, 2015, p. 1161) brings something to the table that reformist approaches to the criminal punishment system do not.

One of the goals of this project is to contribute to an understanding of abolitionism not just as the articulation of an ideal, but as a real movement that works to dismantle oppressive social and societal structures, institutions, and processes, that is being undertaken as we speak, in communities most impacted by incarceration, oppression, and inequality, and that has been taking place for many years. Chapters 4 and 5 contribute to this goal through a synthesis of literature, experiences, and examples of work currently being undertaken, into a kind of visionary platform and suggestions for programs and projects for abolitionist work, as well as for other academics looking to bridge abolitionist scholarship and activism. Chapter 4 works through major debates, critiques, tensions, and challenges in abolitionist theory and praxis, such as the issue of carceral versus abolitionist reforms, the practical challenges involved in the pursuit of long-term abolitionist goals while at the same time working to meet immediate needs of impacted people, and the question of "What do we do with the dangerous people?". The goal with this chapter is not to provide fully formed resolutions for each of these issues, but to take the critiques to abolitionism that they present seriously, consider the various positions in the debates involved, take thorough stock of what is at stake, and what might be needed to move forward, theoretically as well as practically. Chapter 5 offers specific ideas for what an abolitionist vision in action looks like—specifically, how an abolitionist vision can help to construct a society and a set of communities that will support reentering people. This picture is constructed through a synthesis of academic and nonacademic abolitionist writings, and the experiences and accounts of activists engaged in abolitionist work. This chapter also works

through some of the tensions and challenges discussed in Chapter 4, by exploring strategies for implementing abolitionist visions, and grappling with what it means and looks like for abolitionist approaches to reentry to be guided by abolitionist principles. Another goal here is to contribute to the development of what Dean Spade has called "abolitionist discernment"—the ability to apply an abolitionist critical lens to programs, policies, initiatives, systems, and processes, to recognize which are harmful and how to critique them, and which lead to the fulfillment of abolitionist goals of equity, justice, and liberation. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of what lies ahead, what work remains to be done to achieve these goals, and I offer some concrete suggestions for continued scholarly exploration and research, as well as on the ground abolitionist work.

The Current Landscape of Reentry/Rehabilitation/Reintegration

With a state and federal prison population of 1,526,600 and an estimated 688,000 people being released across the country every year (Kaeble and Cowhig, 2016; Wagner and Sakala, 2014), one of the most pressing problems in this era of supposedly declining punitive policy in the United States is that of how to deal with individuals coming out of prison. Recently research, policy, nonprofit, and other social sectors have put forth an amalgam of initiatives dedicated to facilitating reentry. However, with over half of those released into society every year returning to prison within three years, it is clear that these efforts are ineffectual, or at the very least insufficient (Cooper, Durose, and Snyder, 2014; Gelb and Velasquez, 2018). The persistent reality is that the vast majority of those leaving prison face debilitating obstacles to integrating into society successfully; most struggle to access even the most basic resources necessary for a stable, let alone fulfilling, life.

Current scholarship offers a range of explanations as to why people coming out of prison continue to face such impediments, despite reform efforts. Obstacles to reentry are often categorized in the literature in terms of formal and informal barriers. Formal barriers, sometimes referred to as invisible punishment or civil death are the laws and practices that civilly disable individuals with a history of incarceration or a criminal record, resulting an almost total loss of their rights and privileges as citizens. These sanctions, in conjunction with a host of other constraints at the federal and local levels, effectively strip formerly incarcerated people of most of the rights, protections, and freedoms fundamental to citizenship in the US. This not only demotes formerly incarcerated people to an "ex-civilian" status (Braun, 2013) but also makes it nearly impossible to find a home or regular employment (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Morenoff and Harding, 2014; Schlager, 2013; Travis 2002; 2005; Travis, Crayton, and Mukamal, 2009; Trimbur, 2009; Welsh and Rajah, 2014). Formerly incarcerated people cannot access many jobs and professional licenses, due to legal sanctions, lack of job preparation, or employer stigmatization (La Vigne, Wolf, and Jannetta, 2004; Murphy, Fuleihan, Richards, and Jones, 2011; Travis, 2005; Schlager, 2013). Other legal sanctions include voter disenfranchisement, exile for non-U.S. citizens, and permanent interdiction from jury service. They are also prohibited from receiving most kinds of federal or government aid and social services such as welfare, unemployment, subsidized housing, food stamps, eligibility for the Affordable Care Act (Cohen, 2013; La Vigne et al, 2004; Schlager, 2013; Travis, 2005; Uggen and Manza, 2005; Uggen, Manza, and Thompson, 2006), the very services in place to lend assistance to individuals in precisely the position that formerly incarcerated people often find themselves—houseless, unemployed, impoverished, lacking in vocational or educational skills and connections to legitimate employment opportunities.

Informal barriers to reentry include the direct effects of prisonization, such as long-term and sustained exposure to schools of crime and psychological trauma, in addition to weakened support networks and family ties, lack of social, vocational, and educational skills (Maruna, 2001; Travis, 2005; Ross and Richards, 2009), and a lack of effective services to assist individuals transitioning out of prison (Hipp, Petersilia, and Turner, 2010; Kubrin and Stewart, 2006; Mears, Wang, Hay, and Bales, 2008). Stigma and negative public perceptions as a result of stereotypes, media depictions, and misinformation can also create problems for people attempting to reintegrate from prison, by impacting their self-esteem and interfering with policy developments aimed at providing more resources and support for reentering people, by "limit[ing] policymakers and professionals in their ability to implement and sustain reentry policies" (Garland, Wodahl, and Cota, 2016, p. 14). These negative perceptions can also contribute to employers' reluctance to hire people with records, either because of fear of being held liable for problems potential employers think they might cause or the stigma that paints formerly incarcerated people as untrustworthy, inept, or unreliable (Schlager, 2013).

Current Reentry/Rehabilitation Efforts and Their Shortcomings

Current mainstream reentry policy takes place, in its ideal form, in three stages: 1) in-prison rehabilitation and reentry preparation, 2) transitional support and services, 3) long-term, post-release support, continued after the initial transition period (James, 2015). Each stage utilizes programs and/or services that aim to reduce crime or recidivism, such as substance abuse treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy, and employment training or assistance. Programs match individuals to "treatment" through the administration of risk-needs assessments. These instruments evaluate a person's "risk" by tallying factors associated with crime or recidivism—

such as antisocial attitudes, association with peers who have antisocial attitudes, and substance abuse—into a score, which is then used to place the person into a treatment option that is supposed to correspond to their specific type of risks and criminogenic needs (Andrews, Bonta, and Wormith 2000; 2011; Andrews, Guzzo, Raynor, Rowe, Rettinger, Brews, and Wormith, 2012).

The traditional approach fails not only in its implementation but also in its conventional framing. In the following pages, I identify conceptual and practical problems with the theoretical foundations of these policies and programs, and the research upon which they are based. These include a lack of attention to the structural issues involved in reentry, placing the entire burden on incarcerated and reentering people to change, and a very low standard for what counts as a successful case of "rehabilitation" that can result in dangerous neglect of people's material and psychological needs. The past decade has seen an increase in scholarly critiques of mainstream reforms and other kinds of "less punitive" alternatives, such as misdemeanor decriminalization (Natapoff, 2015), diversion courts (McLeod, 2012), and progressive prosecutors (Karakatsanis, 2019). These scholars argue that such attempts to decrease reliance on incarceration can actually "aggravate existing pathologies in U.S. criminal law administration" (McLeod, 2012, p. 1587), expand the reach of the punishment apparatus, and strengthen the carceral state. I argue that reentry and rehabilitation reforms follow a similar pattern. I will show how these conceptual problems in reentry and rehabilitation programs fundamentally limit the impact these efforts are able to have, and cause these policies and programs to exacerbate the very issues they are intended to address. By examining these problematic conceptual foundations, it becomes possible to see how current criminal punishment reform efforts reproduce social disadvantage and the oppressive social conditions that cause crime and injustice in the first place.

Lack of Attention to Structural Issues

Reentry and rehabilitation programs developed and implemented through the carceral state focus almost exclusively on incarcerated and reentering people rather than critically engaging with or even considering the historical, social, political, and economic conditions that have given rise to today's criminal punishment problems. These mainstream approaches attempt to address the symptoms of these problems, but not their roots. This results in a number of issues that cause such reforms and programs to exacerbate the very problems they attempt to solve, which I discuss in this section.

Responsibilization, or Laundering Structural Problems Through Individual Factors. Geoff Ward (2015) describes what he calls the "laundering" of racial violence using legal variables. This is about how administrative crime data fail to account for the unequal, racialized, and racializing conditions and practices that produce those numbers, such as greater presence of police in communities of color, laws that target and criminalize people of color, and racist police culture that encourages the stop and arrest of nonwhites and discourages it for whites. These data and those who use them are "pretending" Ward says, "that prior arrest, detention, charging decisions, sentences…objectively indicate deviance" (p. 309). This creates what Ward calls "bias-laundering," where racially produced data are taken as race-neutral, objective measures of criminal behavior.

The same sort of "laundering" process takes place in reentry and rehabilitative programming in a more general way, through the use of risk-needs assessments, where structural problems such as inequality, exploitation, unequal distribution of resources, and structural racism are translated into individualized deficiencies of system-impacted people. In other words,

because of the way risk is assessed—using variables such as race, employment status, and criminal history—marginalized people are personally blamed for the problems they face as a result of structural circumstances. This is a process that some critical scholars have called "responsiblization," where the responsibility to change is placed almost entirely on incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people (Currie, 2013; Goddard and Myers, 2017; Gray, 2009; Hannah-Moffat, 2015; 2016). Risk assessments predict criminality and recidivism based on individual factors, rather than structural ones. As a result, the programs and practices that are based upon risk-assessment instruments are failing to address the primary sources of crime. This is evident in the near-exclusive focus on "offenders", and "parolees" as the targets of programs, policies, and services. This focus governs almost every aspect of the criminal punishment system, from sentencing and corrections to reentry. It also pervades corrections discourse, which is largely framed in terms of intervening upon the behavior, thinking, and lifestyles of incarcerated people.

Most current rehabilitation and reentry programs are based upon research that has found specific factors or combinations of factors to be systematically associated with crime and recidivism. Such factors include substance abuse, employment, employability, education, housing, psychological health, prosocial or antisocial values, coping skills, etc. (Cullen, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Travis, 2005; Ross and Richards, 2009). The majority of academic literature on the subjects of rehabilitation and reentry is situated within this risk-research paradigm and deals with how to expand and improve risk-assessment technology (Andrews et al, 2011; Baglivio and Jackowski, 2013; Coylewright, 2004). Therefore, this hyperfocus on the individual is particularly evident in the evidence-based approach and its associated models and instruments. Evidence-based policies and programs were developed in response to what was seen as a need to adopt programs demonstrated by social scientists to be "effective," and have since become ubiquitous

throughout the criminal system as a means for making decisions about those under its jurisdiction (Nuttall, Goldblatt and Lewis, 1998). The risk assessment tools developed from this same body of research are used at almost every stage of the criminal punishment system (Andrews and Bonta, 2006; 2011; Andrews, Guzzo, Raynor, Rowe, Rettinger, Brews, and Wormith, 2012). Risk assessment instruments distinguish between static and dynamic risk factors (Bonta and Andrews, 2007): static risk factors are traits of an individual that are "known" to predict crime, but considered unamenable to change, and therefore not considered in any treatment or intervention, such as a person's race or prior record; dynamic risk factors are those that are considered to be changeable, such as substance abuse, or antisocial attitudes, and thus targeted for intervention. These assessments calculate risk scores based on these factors and use them to determine the best course of treatment (ibid.).

Critics of evidence-based programs and risk-assessment technologies argue that individual-level interventions cannot address social, structural level problems. As they currently operate, risk-assessments and evidence-based programs ignore well-established criminological and sociological research about the social-structural roots of crime, and what causes someone to be "at risk" (Goddard and Myers, 2017; Prins and Reich, 2017). For instance, in a risk-needs-assessment framework, race is taken to be a static risk factor. However, the notion that a person's race is not amenable to intervention holds true only within the framework of individual-level interventions. Race is only static when the role of the larger society in constructing and perpetuating race is excluded from consideration (Prins and Reich, 2017). An extensive scholarly tradition of theory and research is devoted to explaining crime in social, structural, economic, and community-level terms, yet the most widely used instrument throughout corrections agencies across the U.S. takes little of it into account. Risk-assessments and current evidence-based

approaches task individuals—who overwhelmingly hail from oppressed and marginalized groups—with their own "rehabilitation" (Currie, 2013; Goddard and Myers, 2017). There are several major issues with this.

This approach demands that marginalized people learn to accept and tolerate the inequitable social conditions in which they find themselves, and evaluates them as maladjusted and crime-prone if they do not (Currie, 2013; Goddard and Myers, 2017). Program emphasis on personal responsibility and individual fault "teaches them to locate the sources of their problems mainly, if not entirely, in themselves" (Currie, 2013, p. 5). Goddard and Myers (2017) situate evidence-based programs and the risk paradigm in the history of coercive, racialized, and oppressive practices of the past, "aimed, disproportionately, at…people of color and their families" (p. 159), arguing that evidence-based programs and risk assessments "replicate earlier instances of oppressive assistance that 'help'…people to better tolerate unconscionable social conditions" (p. 160). An additional problem with risk assessments is their distinction between "criminogenic needs" and "non-criminogenic needs"—needs that correspond to crime and needs that do not. Programs are then developed to address criminogenic needs, while others are deemed irrelevant to the rehabilitative process. Not only is it limiting to consider any kind of needs a person might have to be irrelevant to their care, but this approach also robs individuals of the agency to decide for themselves what their needs are, and instead prescribes needs for them.

Finally, many scholars also criticize how the risk score is produced. What is supposed to be an objective and neutral score produced by a risk assessment tells us less about the characteristics of the person under evaluation than it does about the subjective decisions made by agents of a highly racialized punishment system and the external sociological conditions and practices within which the individual is situated, such as concentrated disadvantage and racial

segregation and oppression (Beckett, 2012). Goddard and Myers point out, for instance, that "number of past convictions"—one of the items which increases risk score—is not a fact about an individual, but the product of discretionary decisions of police officers, prosecutors, judges, and parole officers about that individual, and the application of criminal laws that disproportionately target people of color (Alexander, 2012; Butler 2015; 2017; Ward, 2015). The way these instruments have been designed, poor people of color "are positioned to earn more points than similarly delinquent middle-class counterparts, mostly for reasons entirely out of their control" (Goddard and Myers, 2017, p. 155-156). Operating in ignorance of the power dynamics and structural circumstances that lead to this disproportionality and racial injustice within the criminal punishment system, risk assessments reproduce these conditions of social oppression (Beckett, 2012; Goshe, 2015; Rodriguez, 2019)—the very conditions that land people in prison to begin with, which risk assessments have supposedly been developed to address. In this sense, risk assessments provide a specific example of this process of "laundering," because they "wash away the social processes that are risk producers in themselves…assessment instruments ignore policies and practices of the state that are themselves criminogenic" (Goddard and Myers, 2018, p. 38).

Fixation on the Individual Level in Desistance Scholarship. Even some scholars who aim to escape the individual-level paradigm struggle to get out from under its conceptual constraints. To illustrate this, I look at several examples from desistance scholarship—which studies how individuals successfully give up a crime-involved lifestyle. I focus on this literature in particular because desistance scholars often describe their approach in terms of the need to look not only at the individual, but at "the interplay between individual choices and a range of

wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual" (Farrall, Sharpe, Hunter, and Calverley, 2011, p. 224). Specifically, I look at their use of language.

Although desistance scholars acknowledge the impact of community- and societal-level factors, they remain conceptually limited in so far as they consistently locate the struggles of the desistance process within the individual formerly incarcerated person—by, for instance, calling for the need to further theorize and investigate "the creative responses adopted by ex-offenders to cope with the vagaries of the social world" and the "strategies that desisters must employ to compensate for their social position and highlight the need to adopt a broader and more nuanced definition of life success" (Healy, 2013, p. 568). These suggestions include only instances of how the formerly incarcerated person changes to better fit the external circumstances in which they find themselves, when bringing about desistance clearly requires making additional kinds of changes—specifically, to the structural forces that cause them to find themselves in those conditions.

The struggle to get beyond the conceptual constraint of this hyperfocus on the individual is particularly visible when one notes the tension between these scholars' suggestions for practical approaches to handling the problem of the social and structural barriers that formerly incarcerated people face upon release, and the language that is used to describe how these approaches might take place:

> desisters should be encouraged to imagine and believe in the possibility of a meaningful crime-free self…and to formulate realistic strategies to achieve their life goals…However, such efforts must be supported by interventions and policies designed to improve social capital among offenders (Healy, 2013, p. 572).

It is unclear who might be doing this encouraging, supporting, or designing, because Healy describes these actions entirely in the passive voice and at no point identifies any actual individuals or entities who might bear these responsibilities or be willing to take them on. The only use of the active voice in the discussion refers to "offenders" and "desisters."

> Davis, Bahr, and Ward (2012) provide another example of this telling use of language:
>
> The reintegration of offenders is part of a broader societal problem regarding those who are stigmatized and disenfranchised. In order to reduce crime and recidivism, they need help to gain access to opportunities such as education and training, employment, housing. And they need help in distancing themselves from criminal elements in society (p. 20).

They acknowledge that "the reintegration of offenders is part of a broader societal problem regarding those who are stigmatized and disenfranchised" (p. 20)—so far, so good. However, the rest of the paragraph identifies only "they" and "some" as subjects—referring to "offenders." Despite having just acknowledged that crime, reintegration, and recidivism are functions of societal problems, the suggestions for change are of little assistance in identifying who will provide this help, and which individuals, entities, or institutions might be targeted to address the lack of access to legitimate opportunities for formerly incarcerated people. These examples likely reflect the researchers' own struggles with answers to these questions of "who?" or "what?" But the point here has been to illustrate the tension between these scholars' knowledge that these problems manifesting at the level of the individual are largely caused by broader-level sources of influence, and their inability to articulate potential solutions in anything other than individual terms, in ways that actually target those broader levels.

Low Quality of Life Expectations and the Recidivism Standard

Another major issue with traditional rehabilitation and reentry programs is a very low

standard and expectation for the quality of life for populations who are the target of these

programs. This stems from the widespread use of recidivism reduction as the standard for

success for such programs, and the standard for measuring the "success" of individuals who

complete those programs.

Many scholars and policy-makers have lauded the Second Chance Act (SCA) as one of

the most significant pieces of reentry legislation in recent years (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders,

and Miles, 2013; Drawbridge, Monteiro, and Frost, 2013; Schlager, 2013). The SCA authorizes

funding for programs and research pertaining to rehabilitation and reentry, including substance

abuse treatment, drug courts, federal, state, tribal, and local reentry services, prison and jail

education programs and career training, post-prison supervision and job placement, and mental

health treatment (Department of Justice, 2015). The SCA, as well as almost every other

rehabilitation program in the US, employs a single metric to determine success or failure (Cullen

and Gendreau, 2000; Cullen, 2012), namely, whether it produces an appreciable negative impact

on recidivism (Department of Justice, n.d.). If individuals who complete the program return to

prison more often than not, the program is a failure, and it will usually lose its funding; if they

tend to stay out of prison, it is "successful," and will continue to receive funding. By virtue of

what has become common practice—employing recidivism reduction as the standard for

program success—a program's ability to reduce recidivism has come to be equated, in

operational terms, with its ability to rehabilitate (Cullen and Gendreau, 2000; Cullen, 2012).

The fundamental problem with recidivism reduction as the one and only metric of

program success has to do with the absence of any standards for a person's quality of life post-

release. As Nixon et al. (2008) note, traditional reentry "[assigns] limited life-capacity to the

population of *prisoners-in-reentry*" (p. 28) creating markedly low expectations for what a

successful, fulfilling life is supposed to be for populations who are put through reentry programs.

A hypothetical example can serve to illustrate this: a formerly incarcerated person living under a

bridge, suffering from alcoholism and chronic illness, with no recourse to medical or substance

abuse treatment, qualifies, according to the current standard, as rehabilitated, as long as they

have not been rearrested. A program whose graduates all found themselves in this position would

be considered a successful program and would receive credit for its rehabilitative powers.

Currie (2013) describes the same problem:

> we measure the "success" of these efforts in very minimal and essentially negative ways:
> they commit fewer crimes, do fewer drugs…maybe get, at least briefly, some sort of job.
> And even if the job is basically exploitative and short-lived and their future options are
> slim and their present lives are still pinched, desperate and precarious, we still count that
> as all good – as evidence of programmatic success (p. 5).

Even where qualitative standards exist, the goal is not for program participants to flourish. When

these individuals manage to struggle by at minimum baseline under oppressive social conditions

that lead many to crime in the first place, as long as they are tolerating those conditions without

acting out in a "criminal" manner, the intervention is considered a success (Currie, 2013;

Goddard and Myers, 2017; Goshe, 2015). With that evidence-based stamp, such a program will

usually enjoy continued funding, and perhaps even be used as a model to be replicated in other

institutions and other areas.

Why Abolition? Why is Reform Not Enough?

The problematic assumptions and conceptual constraints discussed thus far are built into

institutional attempts to address crime, public safety, rehabilitation, reentry, and justice, as well

as much of the research that supports them. This leaves us with the questions of what to do, how to approach improving conditions and positive outcomes for people in prison, people being released, and the communities they come from; how to address the major injustices that are produced and reproduced even through major efforts to rectify these problems, and how to build a truly just society.

Many researchers are working to address these questions, and the typical approach is to investigate and propose ideas about how we might improve current reforms or devise new ones. Within criminological and legal scholarship, proposals for how to truly respond to these societal atrocities are equally wanting. Rodriguez (2019), Akbar (2018), and McLeod (2019) discuss the limitations of current scholarship's ideas about criminal punishment reform, the ways in which traditional legal perspectives of reform tend to uphold the status quo, and the trend in this scholarship to conform to a "liberal narrative about law's tendency to do the right thing" (Akbar, 2018, p. 476). Rodriguez refers the liberal-to-progressive reform narrative, which adheres to a view of law as tending toward progress, and assumes the violence, systemic bias, and institutional dysfunction of carceral systems to be deviations and errors, "scandalous excesses" (p. 1576), rather than fundamental and systemic features of those systems. It assumes that surface-level approaches such as internal auditing, shifts in law and policy, "piecemeal rearrangements of state infrastructure" (p. 1594), and "bureaucratic invigorating" (p. 1596) through increases in efficiency, surveillance, and control, will be able to fix what is wrong with them. This enables reforms that legitimate, reinforce, and augment the carceral state, increase its power, and ultimately serve to reproduce its mechanisms of violence and oppression.

A growing number of scholars and activists advance this argument that reform is not sufficient, that it is "superficial and deceptive" (Karakatsanis, 2019, p. 851). This perspective is

based on increasing evidence that much of what reformists claim is wrong with the criminal punishment system—such as high rates of recidivism, severe racial disparities, and extreme obstacles to reintegration—is in fact intrinsic to the logic of how it is intended to work, that the system is inherently and purposively stacked against the interests of the poor, minorities, and marginalized groups (Alexander, 2010; Berger, 2014; Butler, 2015; 2017; Butts and Akbar, 2017; Davis, 2003; Karakatsanis, 2019). Even under ideal circumstances, these scholars argue, our current systems cannot be just, fair, or humane (Karakatsanis, 2019). Therefore, attempts to address the current problems that assume the systems in place for handling crime and dispensing "justice" are appropriate starting points that need only be improved, will not suffice. This is because the surface-level reforms that dominate mainstream conversations about the criminal punishment system "are co-opting a movement toward profound change by convincing the public that the 'law enforcement' system as we know it can operate in an objective, effective, and fair way based on 'the rule of law'" (Karakatsanis, 2019, pp. 851-852).

> Scholars have provided different arguments for why reforms do greater harm than good: Reform has a pacification effect. It calms the natives even when they should not be calm. "False consciousness" is the term some theorists have used to describe the tendency of liberal reforms to "dupe those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy" with promises of "equality, fairness, and neutrality" (Butler, 2017, p. 197).

Not only are reforms ineffective, so the argument goes, they are harmful and insidious in that they create the illusion of addressing criminal punishment system problems when in fact they reproduce the systems of inequality, racism, oppression, and injustice that they purport to address (Butts and Akbar, 2017; Karakatsanis, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019; Spade, 2012). Programs, and reform efforts in general, tend to divorce crime problems from their structural roots. They are dedicated to working *within* the current structure, therefore reifying it, and distracting from the

notion that the structure itself is inherently sick, violent, and destructive. Butts and Akbar (2017) lay out these problems succinctly:

> Reformist reforms do not recognize that the systems that operate on Black people, and by extension on brown, immigrant and poor people, are not fundamentally broken but instead are working to re-entrench and legitimize current power arrangements. Throughout history the response to robust movement has been to implement reformist reforms that quell rebellion and protest but are at heart just crisis management interventions that often intentionally do not challenge or even acknowledge the underlying economic arrangement (i.e. racialized capitalism) or prevailing cultural narratives (i.e. white hegemony and anti-Blackness). Reformist reforms seek surface level changes often in reaction to increasing pressure from those who are being oppressed but do not seek to reimagine current systems or reallocate power. These reforms, under the guise of change, often reinvest and/or expand resources and money into punitive or surveillance oriented state systems or create new opportunities for profit off of them Reformist reforms do not seek to interrogate either the impact or intent of systems bu instead shifts the conversation away from systemic critiques to a focus on the individual (p. 4).

Karakatsanis (2019) identifies a number of common characteristics that these kinds of hollow reforms share. He argues that they operate from the assumption that individual problems in the punishment system such as recidivism or police bias are fixable with policies that only address those particular issues, without confronting deeper systemic ones such as white supremacy, economic deprivation, or lack of access to healthcare. They are based on the mythology that the system is fundamentally right and good and capable of achieving justice, it is just that it has gone wrong in some areas. They do not shift power, control, and resources *out* of the punishment system; they keep power and control in the hands of the same institutions and actors that create and sustain the carceral state. In some cases the proposals actually involve giving them greater power, such as reform projects that propose to "improve" mental health conditions in jails by constructing specialized carceral facilities or wings to house mentally ill people, or additional budget allocation to police departments for body cameras and bias trainings. Their goal is to expand the punishment bureaucracy, not to shrink it, and certainly not

to transfer power and resources to communities. And finally, because these kinds of reforms maintain or augment power within the system, they make no attempt to build up institutions or sustainable infrastructure to dismantle the punishment system, such as community-based wellness.

Saleh-Hanna (2017) offers a novel and helpful framework for understanding this pattern by analyzing criminal punishment reform machinations in terms of theories developed for understanding the cycles of abusive relationships. She notes parallels "between the tendencies of abusive men to deny the harm they inflict upon their victims and the narratives they use to legitimize their own violence with the narratives and legitimacies of the criminal justice system" (p. 421). She looks at how these patterns of structural abuse, the cycles of repentance and empty promises of change, the victim's continued delusional acceptance of those promises and misplaced trust that their abuser will change, and the eventual recurrence of violence by the abuser, play out throughout history and through various institutions. Her analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the point Butler makes in the excerpt above:

> Perceptions of "calm" are a direct product of the larger cycles of structurally abusive relationships and are dangerous because they keep victims of [Racial-Imperialist-Patriarchy] invested and paradoxically believing in the ability of the system to take care of them (p. 423).

Regardless of what the criminal punishment system in the US purports to do, or try to do, there is tremendous evidence that it operates as an apparatus for controlling and managing marginalized social groups. Put another way, prisons are functionally oppressive, racist institutions that systematically do violence to specific segments of the population (Alexander, 2012; Davis, 2003; Wacquant, 2001). This violence goes well beyond incarcerated individuals, extending to families and communities, traversing generations, and impacting society as a whole

(Ward, 2012; 2015). In this sense, we can evaluate the criminal punishment system as a powerful and effective machine for upholding and reproducing certain social and political power arrangements, and oppressive, unjust, and inhumane social conditions for those groups under its control.

The examples of reforms I have discussed are situated within the framework and logic of the current system (Ben-Moshe, 2013) and serve to reproduce and reinforce that system. This is evidenced by the fact that these approaches treat crime and violence as problems that can be solved by "correcting" people convicted of crimes without also looking to larger social problems. To this extent, abolitionist approaches respond to these critiques in a way that these others do not. As Byrd (2016) observes, the abolitionist perspective is "rigorously reflective" (p. 86) about the connections between reform and carceral expansion and the tendency of the punishment system to co-opt critique, because abolition "refuses to view the prison as an isolated institution" (p. 88), and instead understands it as part of a set of relationships that need to be entirely transformed or recreated, in order to achieve anything that can actually be called justice. Abolitionism raises the question "What if law reform was not targeted towards seeing what kinds of improvements we can make to the current system but was instead geared toward building a state governed by different logics?" (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 479). Scholars who have written about the potential of an abolitionist perspective have noted its ability to provide a "cultural intervention" (Cullors, 2018), and a counter-narrative to the liberal-progressive paradigm of law that upholds and legitimates state interventions through reforms that re-entrench carceral power (Akbar, 2018; Rodriguez, 2019). Abolitionists demand much more than surface level reforms, and instead are committed to reimagining the possibilities of law by working to shift power into impacted communities, and "fundamentally transforming the relationship among state, market,

and society" (Akbar, 2018, p. 408). Insofar as abolitionism can be understood as "a practice, an

analytical method, a present-tense visioning, a creative project, an ideological struggle"

(Rodriguez, 2019), I bring an abolitionist perspective to bear on the issues of reentry I have

raised here.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT ABOLITIONISM IS: GOALS, HISTORIES, VARIATIONS

The purpose of this chapter will be to talk about some of the major goals of abolition, its historical legacies, and some of its variations. I do this to provide historical context for the discussions in the chapters that follow, and to illustrate how these historical legacies show up in and relate to contemporary abolitionist reentry work, and abolitionist work and thought in general. The distinctions I draw in what follows, between slight variations in abolitionist perspectives, and the different historical lineages of abolitionist work and thought are merely conceptual tools. In truth, they cannot always be completely separated, and the relationships between them are complex.

Goals

The primary goal of abolition, as it understood by most contemporary abolitionists, is to eliminate carceral institutions, the prison industrial complex, and the criminal punishment system as a whole—and to replace them with nonpunitive ways of addressing harm, and accommodating people reentering from incarceration and the communities they enter into, that empower, rather than disenfranchise, those vulnerable populations and communities. For many abolitionists this requires understanding abolition as a larger project of not only eliminating prisons and the punishment system, but of dismantling the structures, dynamics, and power relations that have allowed the punishment system to exist as it does. Thus, the project of abolition is contextualized by most abolitionists as part of a longer history of struggle against colonialism, enslavement, and white supremacy, of rebellion and resistance, as a next step in that larger project (Alexander, 2010; Byrd, 2016; Davis, 2003, 2005; Rodriguez, 2019), a rejection of the propagated notion that

the primary purpose of the criminal punishment system is public safety, understanding instead

that it exists to sustain and serve the interest of imperialist, racial capitalism (Calathes, 2017;

Davis, 2003, 2005; Saleh-Hanna, 2017).

The term "prison industrial complex" describes the deeply interconnected nature of the

prison with corporations, government, the economy, global capitalism, and the media. It helps us

understand the economic and political incentives behind prison construction and expansion,

capturing the process through which incarceration is profitized and ensconced into the structure

of local and global economies (Davis, 2003; 2005; Gilmore, 2007; Schept, 2015; Sudbury,

2004). Derived from "military–industrial complex," the term highlights similarities between

prisons and the military, as both "produce vast profits out of immense social destruction and

[transform] public funds into private profits" (Sudbury, 2004, p. 17).

If understood even more broadly, beyond economic incentives and the incestuous

relationship of the carceral system with corporations and government, this conception of the

penal system can also capture the white supremacist logic and imperialist ideology that

permeates it, and within which it is rooted:

> terminology like the 'carceral state,' 'prison nation,' and 'PIC' are able to locate mass
> imprisonment in the political economic and sociocultural changes of divestment and
> austerity—deindustrialization, the loss of jobs, the retreat of the welfare state,
> privatization and the fortification of police power and security, the ongoing project of
> racialized criminalization that have produced and characterize the carceral era. This
> broader treatment extracts the prison from its narrow place in the popular imagination as
> being just about crime and punishment and instead relocates it in conversations about
> employment, economies, imperialism, racial justice, uneven development, public health,
> climate change and environmental justice, land use, and neoliberal ideology (Brown and
> Schept, 2017, p. 448)

Thus, scholarship that places the penal system in the context of the larger global project of

imperialism is particularly helpful for understanding the importance of conceptualizing abolition

as a larger project. To the extent that the goal of many abolitionists is to dismantle not only

prisons but the prison-industrial complex as a whole, disrupting this symbiosis between prisons

and these other major powers, institutions, and interests requires much more than the elimination

of carceral institutions. It requires dismantling the institutional and social context within which

prisons have become so deeply intertwined with the economy, and thought of as an acceptable

way to deal with social problems. Articulated with slight variations by a multitude of abolitionist

scholars, from this perspective, the goal is "to dismantle not only criminal justice institutions, but

also the racial order and the rule of capital" (McDowell and Fernandez, 2018, p. ?). In an oft-

quoted passage in the abolition literature, Moten and Harney (2004) describe the object of

abolition as

> [n]ot 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 (p. 114).

This requires us to "recognize the extent that our present social order—in which are embedded a

complex array of social problems—will have to be radically transformed" (Davis, 2005, p. 69),

and "to fundamentally rethink the role of the state in society" (Wang, 2018, p. 297) which "also

requir[es] us to work toward the total transformation of all social relations"(ibid).

Along similar lines, CounterPower (2020a) puts forward an understanding of abolition

that

> includes not only the abolition of capital and wage labor, but also the abolition of the
> heteropatriarchal family, the abolition of whiteness, antiblackness, and all systems of
> racial ordering, the abolition of colonial domination, the abolition of fossil-fueled forms
> of production…in other words…every dimension of the present state of things needs to
> be critically assessed and purged of its relations of domination, exploitation,
> intergenerational violence, and dehumanization (pp. 74-75).

Thus, in addition to requiring a fundamental transformation in the societal response to "crime" (Davis, 2005; Sudbury, 2004), and a transformation in our collective understanding of several basic concepts such as crime and justice (Brown and Schept, 2017; Knopp, Boward, Morris, and Schnapper, 1976; McLeod, 2019)—a subject I explore more in Chapter 5—it also requires a radical restructuring of society and redistribution of resources (Davis, 2005).

The Black Radical Tradition

This understanding of abolition as much more than the replacement of penal institutions with new ways of resolving harms, instead implying a commitment to the complete dismantling of capitalism, patriarchy, settler-colonialism, and Western-European society as we know it, and the insistence that penal abolition cannot be accomplished without it, is indebted to the tradition of black radical thinkers of the 60s and 70s such as George Jackson, and further back to the work of individuals such as Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner. One of the major arguments of 1960s and 70s radical black intellectualism and activism was that reform merely amounted to re-entrenching and strengthening the system (Berger, 2014; Berger and Losier, 2018; Jackson, 1994; Knopp et al, 1976; Rodriguez, 2006). The uncompromising critique of reform was characteristic of many of the writings that emerged from this movement. As Berger and Losier remark in their history of the struggle to be rid of prisons,

> the crisis of legitimacy that prisons faced in the 1960s and 1970s because of major strikes, uprisings, lawsuits, and publications by prisoners and supported by the broad social movements at the time…The prison movement[4] had its biggest impact in these two decades. The uprisings, strikes, and publications coming out of prisons shaped a national conversation about whether and how to reform or abolish prisons (Berger and Losier, 2018, p. 12).

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[4] Berger and Losier use the term 'prison movement' to encompass abolition and other forms of fight against the carceral system.

George Jackson's *Blood In My Eye* (1990) is a poignant example of this, as a work that

represents not just an opposition and challenge to the existence of the prison, but a "rejection of

the political and moral legitimacy of a capitalist, white-supremacist state" (Rodriguez, 2006, p.

86) out of which the prison and the carceral state have grown as arms of social control. Jackson's

stance was very clear that reform would not bring about the kind of changes he saw as necessary:

> Reshuffle the governmental personnel and forms, without changing property relations
> and economic institutions, and you have produced simply another reform stage in the old
> bourgeois revolution…Revolution within a modern industrialist capitalist society can
> only mean the overthrow of all existing property relations and the destruction of all
> institutions that directly or indirectly support existing property relations. It must include
> the total suppression of all classes and individuals who endorse the present state of
> property relations or who stand to gain from it. Anything less than this is reform
> (Jackson, 1990, p. 8).

In these kinds of perspectives we find some of the more expansive and radical articulations of

abolitionism, which I will call *revolution abolitionism*: those that call not only for the elimination

of the criminal system, but for an uncompromising fundamental and comprehensive re-

structuring of society as we know it. This perspective usually argues that we cannot successfully

eliminate the criminal system without eliminating the society within which it exists. It is in this

sense that abolition can be thought of as encompassing a much larger social, societal, and

historical project that takes us far beyond the abolition of prisons, and even the entire criminal

justice system.

Variations in Abolitionist Perspectives

Even among those abolitionists who agree that prison and penal abolition are parts of a

march larger project of social and structural transformation, there are differences in perspective

that have implications for practical strategies. For instance, Davis (2003, 2005) articulates a view

of penal institutions as damaging to American democracy, while Rodriguez (2006), Olson

(2004), McDowell and Fernandez (2018) argue that punitive carceral logic and the prison regime

are a *product* of American democracy, that racial oppression is inherently part of American

democracy rather than antithetical to it (Olson, 2004). For these authors, support of American

democracy means support for the white-supremacy, imperialism, militarism, and violence that

have always been its foundations:

> Contemporary abolitionists recognize current democracies, and particularly that of the
> United States, as a farce, characterized by hollow pretensions to inclusion in the face of a
> collective failure to reckon honestly with histories of slavery, genocide of indigenous
> peoples, lynching, segregation, exploitation of the working poor, gendered violence, and
> the persistent inequalities those practices have wrought (McLeod, 2019, p. 1618).

This is part of a deeper, more comprehensive critique in the tradition of critical race

theorists, who argue that racial inequality, racism, and white supremacy are baked into the

institutional and structural foundations of the United States, woven through the fabric of the

country, such that racism is not an opponent of democracy, but instead, central to it. This leads

some scholars and activists (Butts and Akbar, 2017; CounterPower, 2020; Du Bois, 2017;

Washington, 1986; McDowell and Fernandez, 2018; Olson, 2004) to conclude that "[i]t is only

through dismantling both of these institutions [democracy and racism], that we will bring forth

emancipatory possibilities" (McDowell and Fernandez, 2018).[5]

Others with a similarly critical view of American society, and the nefarious rule of

capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism generally, and with an equally comprehensive vision of

change, however, have different ideas about how we might get there (Agid, Berndt, Herzing, and

Wohlfeiler, n.d.; KatherineKellyAbraham, 2018; Wang, 2018; Tuck and Yang, 2012). Many

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[5] This raises the controversial question of whether dismantling democracy is a liberatory idea. At this point I am not making an argument here one way or the other; however, if one maintains, as McDowell and Fernandez do, that racial oppression is inherently part of American democracy, then this could be considered a necessary component of liberation.

contemporary abolitionist perspectives, both scholarly and activist, maintain that it is possible to

achieve abolitionist goals incrementally, without the requirement of revolution. Some of these

views differ simply in the order in which they believe these steps should be taken, which brings

us to the subject of strategies. Some abolitionist perspectives say we need to build up alternatives

first, and slowly, piece by piece, render the existing system obsolete (Davis, 2003; 2005; Kletsan

2018; Knopp et al, 1976). Others advocate for "cooperatively dismantl[ing] the state…*before*

promoting alternative social systems and political worlds" (KatherineKellyAbraham, 2018,

italics added). And still others say we should do both at the same time, engage in projects of

building and dismantling simultaneously:

> Hulsman, Mathiesen and other abolitionists have long insisted on the impossibility to
> abolish the prisons or punishment without first making possible different representations
> of problematic situations and criminalized individuals (Carrier and Piché, 2015a).

McDowell and Fernandez (2018) introduce the concept of *dual power* to describe this strategy of

dismantling current structures concurrently with the construction of new, emancipatory ones,

adding that these new institutions must replace functions currently being performed by the state,

while simultaneously challenging its authority—unlike nonprofits, which can co-exist with the

state (INCITE! 2007).

Some are committed to "a radical project of abolition and insurgent political praxis"

which "*refuses to negotiate with the state*, or seek recognition from any of its bureaucratic

apparatuses" (KatherineKellyAbraham, 2018, italics added) which are taken to "secure…small-

scale concessions that only colonize and quell resistance" (ibid.), which echoes the position of

thinkers such as Jackson. McDowell and Fernandez (2018) highlight the distinction between

abolitionist thought developed by academics, and abolitionist thought that emerges from praxis,

and on-the-ground abolitionist activism. The former, they argue, tends to result in liberal, compromised versions of abolition, which they contrast with radical interpretations of abolition, which arise out of abolitionist movements. Liberal tendencies, they caution, operate precisely to bring about those "small-scale concessions that only colonize and quell resistance" that KatherineKellyAbraham denounce. Rodriguez also notes this proclivity of liberal approaches to 'quell resistance' when he remarks, speaking of reformist and liberal reforms, that "the language of negotiation, dialogue, progress, moderation, and peace…has become hegemonic in discourses of social change and social justice" (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 8).

McDowell and Fernandez, like KatherineKellyAbraham, reject efforts to compromise, to pursue abolitionist goals via incremental reforms. Noting that it was resistance and rebellion, not liberal, bourgeois centrist cooperation, that galvanized slavery abolition, they advocate instead for "an ethical position that seeks a more abrupt and immediate change" (McDowell and Fernandez, 2018, p. 376). They draw upon Olson's work (2007), which advocates a fanatical politics (he does not intend for 'fanatical' to be pejorative here), characterized by "the unconventional, extraordinary political mobilization of the refusal to compromise" (forthcoming), which he contrasts with a more diplomatic, concessionary, approach that he also notes tends to be characteristic of liberal progressive reformers, who pursue—and he might argue, settle for—incremental reforms on the way to an end goal.

This perspective characterizes what they call radical abolition. Radical abolition, they explain, "places the racial structure of society at the center of the analysis" (p. 377) maintaining that racial order is to be the primary focus of movement work. Although radical abolitionists are looking not only to take down the carceral state, but the racial order and rule of capital that helps to maintain it, radical abolition can be thought of as something slightly different from revolution

abolition, to the extent that the former does not necessarily involve an inherent commitment to the requirement of revolution to achieve the goals described.

Others find this blanket refusal to cooperate with the state in any way to be an impractical approach, believing that not only is it possible to accomplish meaningful change this way, but that it may be more difficult to do so without it—a tension in abolitionist thought and work that will be discussed further, specifically in the section in Chapter 6 on reformist/carceral versus nonreformist/abolitionist reforms.

Historical Legacies of Abolition

Various individuals and groups who identify as abolitionists locate contemporary abolitionist work in different historical legacies. Some locate it in the legacy of the project of abolishing oppressive racist and racializing institutions that are a part of the carceral state's, and the country's history—slavery, lynching, segregation, etc. (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; 2006). I call this the "New Jim Crow" narrative. Others align the project of abolitionism with struggles for liberation against oppression, exploitation, and injustice much more broadly and generally, situating abolition in the tradition of resistance against colonialism, enslavement, exploitation, and injustice from all periods of history, across the globe, thinking of abolition as a continuation of emancipatory projects that have been taking place for as long as exploitation, oppression, and injustice have been there to fight against, as CounterPower does in the excerpt above. This second conceptualization is of abolition as a "broad-based human rights movement" (Berger and Losier, 2018, p. 2), involving a critique not just of prisons, but the society in which prisons are used to "solve" social problems. Here I will provide a brief description and discussion of these varying perspectives on the history of abolition.

The New Jim Crow Narrative

The New Jim Crow narrative of abolition is a function of what Heiner (2015) calls a "functional and semiotic continuity" (p. 32) between the institutions of slavery and post-Civil War penality, "marked by the coercive extremes through which the two regimes served to control and exploit black labor and bolster white supremacy" (p. 32). This functional and semiotic continuity is well documented in the work of scholars such as Wacquant, Davis, Alexander, Rodriguez, and others. Wacquant "situate[s] the prison in the full lineage of institutions which, at each epoch, have carried out the work of race making" (p. 98), of "ethnoracial division and domination in the United States" (p. 97). Those institutions being slavery, the Jim Crow era, the ghetto, and the prison, with failed reconstruction, lynching, the KKK, and the post-civil war riots emerging with these institutions (Davis, 2005). The spirit of the New Jim Crow narrative of abolition is embodied in the work of Frederick Douglass, who noted in 1865 that "whether this [13th] Constitutional Amendment is law [or] not…I hold that the work of Abolitionists is not done…" (Foner and Taylor, 2000, p. 578), as well as the work of Du Bois, who would situate the New Jim Crow lineage of the abolitionist project as beginning with the United States' inception. Du Bois argued that "democracy in the United States started with a white racially constructed citizen" (p. McDowell and Fernandez, 2018, p. 377), and is, as such, racialized and racializing from the very start. Rodriguez (2019) is another scholar who has situated abolition in this tradition:

> The long historical praxis of abolition is grounded in a Black radical genealogy of revolt and transformative insurgency against racial chattel enslavement and the transatlantic trafficking of captive Africans…abolitionist critique, organizing and collective movement…honor and extend this tradition (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 1576).

As does Cullors (2018), who describes abolitionist work as "guided by political movement traditions against slavery and racism dating back to the African and Indigenous Maroons of the Americas who dared to imagine their lives without shackles…" (p. 1685). McDowell and Fernandez (2018), too, talk about what they call the 'radical interpretation' of abolition as having its roots in the Abolitionist Movement of the late 1700s United States, and the work of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown.

Identification of the abolitionist project with this particular tradition of struggle is present not only in academic works, but among activists and organizers engaged in abolitionist work as well. Critical Resistance is one such organization:

> The present-day work of [Critical Resistance] and abolition has to proceed with organic recognition of its historical roots in liberation struggles against slavery, colonization, and conquest—and therefore struggle to constantly develop effective, creative, and political educating forms of radical movement against the genocidal white supremacist state and the society to which it's tethered (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008, p. 8).

But this description hints also at identification of the history of abolition with a broader fight against not only slavery, but "colonization, and conquest," and some abolitionists prefer to identify their work with this larger scale legacy, not limited to matters of race, or to the United States alone.

Broader Conception: Abolition as Part of a Struggle for Liberation Generally

In addition to this statement from Critical Resistance, situating abolitionist work in a broader lineage of emancipatory struggle, some contemporary scholars contribute to this notion of abolitionist history. Byrd (2016) notes that "*[a]bolition* references a longer history of struggle against colonialism and enslavement" (p. 88), and she describes it as being part of a "longer

trajectory of rebellion and resistance" (ibid). Carrier and Piché (2015b) provide a list of historical

instances of struggle against oppression, violence, and imperialism that abolitionists have

claimed, which "fasten[s] contemporary abolitionism to struggles associated with major

historical achievements of Western civilization" (p. 5). This list includes slavery, witch burning,

the Roman Empire, psychiatric institutions in Italy, the suppression of LGBTQ+ rights, the fall

of the Iron Curtain, forced labor for "alcoholic vagrants" in Norway, and youth reform schools in

Massachusetts. "In this way," they explain, "abolitionism is naturalized as a symptom of the

general human urge to do away with and struggle against those phenomena or institutions of a

social, political or religious nature that are a given time are considered to be unjust, wrong or

unfair" (pp. 5-6). This perspective aligns contemporary abolitionist work with struggles

extending far beyond the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Berger and Losier (2018) also clearly state their view that the abolition movement is

connected to broader struggles; they note that because conversations about prisons are

inextricably intertwined with conversations about politics, the economy, equity, sexual freedom,

workers' rights, and other urgent matters, "[t]he future of the American prison movement

is…bound up with its past, pursuing the central questions of humanity" (p. 181). According to

their extensive historical account, whether and to which concurrent and historical struggles

members of the abolitionist movement[6] have identified their work as linked to, or as being a

continuation of, varies based on the period of resistance. They note that "during the rebellion

years"—a period they identify as 1968 to 1972—abolitionist movements "linked their conditions

with critiques of American capitalism, racism, and imperialism" (p. 73), so, expanding their

endeavor as being connected to larger struggles in the global political order. This, they contrast

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[6] While their analysis is limited to the United States, the idea that abolitionists' identification with this or that historical lineage may vary by period can be extrapolated to understand this phenomenon generally.

with anti-prison activist and resistance movements of other periods, such as from 1940 to 1968, which they note are more of a specific response to forms of institutional racism, racialized oppression, and social control. While some might argue that abolitionist and insurrectionary movements of the late 1960s to earlier 1970s seem to be more specifically concentrated on race than many other eras, the point here is that *which* particular resistance legacy abolitionist struggles locate themselves in is somewhat complex historically, and varies by time, place, and zeitgeist.

It has also been argued that the reason why some abolitionists situate their work in somewhat more limited legacies of struggle[7] is that the lessons from the broader historical picture have been truncated. In a gathering hosted by Critical Resistance to celebrate Los Angeles abolitionist activists' victory in blocking the construction of a brand new jail in 2019, Ruth Gilmore Wilson gave a talk, in which she emphasized the paramount importance of linking abolitionist work across space and time, to reconnect abolitionist struggles that have been disconnected from one another (Gilmore, 2019). This echoes Berger and Losier's (2018) description of the project of abolition as both "episodic and ubiquitous" (p. 5). Both Gilmore, and Berger and Losier's analyses point to the fact that regional, national, and international continuity has sometimes been difficult to maintain because—among other reasons—many of these projects are grassroots movements that lack the funding and infrastructure to effect the kind of coordination necessary to bind all of this abolitionist work together into one continuous, coherent project—conceptually or practically. Instead, as Berger and Losier (2018) note, "each upsurge of social movement activity tends to 'discover' anew America's prison problem" (p. 5). Providing a specific illustration of this, Berger and Losier describe the 1980s and 90s in the US

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[7] To call it 'limited' is by *no* means to diminish the importance of continuing the project of eliminating slavery and racial oppression in the United States, or of understanding abolition through a racial lens.

as a dark time for abolitionists and those fighting against the carceral system, primarily because

of "the splintering of the elements that had once made the movement a potent force in U.S.

society" (p. 143), with members of this movement finding it "more difficult to sustain the broad

coalition that had been a key part of earlier phases of the movement" (p. 143). They also note

that a major contributing factor to this was the new design of prisons at that time—of extreme

isolation—which were intended specifically to make organizing among incarcerated people more

difficult (Berger and Losier, 2018).

Understanding These Legacies Together

Another approach to looking at these various ways that abolitionists situate their work

vis-á-vis history is to understand the New Jim Crow narrative of abolition as strategic: pointing

out the fact that the idea of slavery abolition was once unimaginable to many can help to render

the idea of a world without prisons less unimaginable (Berger and Losier, 2018). As the

Abolition Collective states in their manifesto: "Abolitionist politics is not about what is possible,

but about making the impossible a reality" (Abolition Collective, 2018, p. 4).

However, positioning contemporary abolition in the tradition of slavery abolition or the

abolition of oppressive structures and systems writ large are not by any means mutually

exclusive, and in fact most abolitionists claim both histories. For instance, in that same

manifesto, the Abolition Collective explicitly situates itself not only in the tradition of slavery

abolition, but also of projects of abolition of oppressive systems in general:

> we…[draw] inspiration from those who have sought the abolition of all systems of
> domination, exploitation, patriarchy, and oppression—from Jim Crow and prisons to
> patriarchy and capitalism…we also refer to *all* revolutionary movements, insofar as they
> have abolitionist elements—whether the abolition of patriarchy, capitalism,
> heteronormativity, ableism, colonialism, the state, or white supremacy (pp. 4-5).

They go on to describe some of the specific struggles to which they refer—dramatic income inequality, egregious racial injustices in the criminal punishment system, the state of the environment, gendered and sexual violence, war and resource exploitation. In another instance of situating abolition in both histories, Rodriguez (2006) gives an account of the history of the prison as being not solely about racial oppression, but about oppression and social control more generally. Rather than adhering strictly to the notion that the prison can be explicated almost entirely as a continuation of slavery and in the legacy of other explicitly racial institutions, and as specifically a tool of *racial* domination, instead he describes the carceral system as operating according to a kind of "chattel logic" (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 42). With this term, Rodriguez appeals not only to the history of slavery in the United States, but to the history of slavery, "[t]he problem of human captivity" (p. 39), and of managing underclass populations generally.

Both historical legacies are useful for contemporary abolitionist projects. For instance, perhaps one of the greatest insights for abolitionist work is the idea that abolition cannot only mean dismantling oppressive structures, but must also mean building new, emancipatory ones. This is an idea that emerged from Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* and Angela Davis' (2005) analysis of that text, where she notes that abolition must involve a positive process of building, of "re-imagining institutions, ideas, and strategies, and creating new institutions" (Davis, 2005, p. 75). Du Bois argued that true abolition of slavery required a two-part process, a 'negative' project of eliminating of the practice of slavery, in addition to a positive project, namely the creation of new institutions to provide black people—and marginalized populations generally— with the economic and social resources needed to truly become part of the social order. Slavery abolition, Du Bois argued, was accomplished only in this negative sense. Because a positive

project did not take place, because "the *slave relation* has never been abolished and instead has been constantly reanimated through changing regimes of carceral domestic war" (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 1582, emphasis added), "black people encountered other forms of slavery—from debt peonage and the convict leasing system to segregated and second-class education" (Davis, 2005, p. 69). Extending Du Bois's analysis, Davis (2005) writes that it is because this positive project was never undertaken, that we have the prison system we do today:

> when slavery was abolished, black people were set free, but they lacked access to the material resources that would enable them to fashion new, free lives. Prisons have thrived over the last century precisely because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery (Davis, 2005, p. 92).

This need for slavery abolition to involve a positive process of building, as much as, if not more than one of tearing down, is carried through to contemporary abolition which emphasizes the importance of abolition as *generative* work, of building those new institutions and alternatives. And it remains an essential aspect of contemporary abolitionist projects regardless of whether it situates itself mainly in the legacy of slavery abolition or as connected to larger-scale abolitionist goals; but, this essential component emerged out of a New Jim Crow narrative analysis of the project of abolition.

These two historical lineages ultimately depend on and are strengthened by one another—the broad conception is strengthened by the New Jim Crow narrative in the way just described, and as many scholars and activists have understood, issues of slavery and racial oppression are strengthened by linking themselves to broader legacies of revolutionary movements and struggle against all forms of oppression, exploitation, and injustice. As McDowell and Fernandez explain, slavery abolitionists "understood slavery not as a self-contained issue, but rather as an institution that defined global struggles for democracy writ

large" (McDowell and Fernandez, 2018, p. 376). "[R]ecogniz[ing] that the oppression of slaves was linked to other wrongs in the world" (Sinha, 2016, p. 3) lent greater credence to their own struggles. In the same way, the contemporary abolitionist project is strengthened by understanding and positioning itself as a fight against patriarchy, capitalism, heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, colonialism, white supremacy, environmental and economic injustices, resource exploitation, and war, making it truly a project of "pursuing the central questions of humanity" (Berger and Losier, 2018, p. 181).

Both legacies are useful together and separately, insofar as they bring a historical analysis to bear on any issue being critiqued from an abolitionist perspective. For the present purposes of an abolitionist critique of mainstream reentry practices, the abolitionist perspective that state mechanisms of carceral control—including the most progressively-minded reentry and rehabilitation reforms—are rooted in a history of racial oppression, builds a critique of structural racism into an analysis of these reforms, and unmasks their status as tools of continuing racial oppression. Understanding abolition as situated in both these historical legacies together, also highlights the specific ways that an abolitionist approach to reentry and rehabilitation must be grounded in decolonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, counter-patriarchal principles and values if they are to truly achieve justice. We will see this, specifically, in the examples of abolitionist approaches to reentry in the following section.

CHAPTER 3: REENTRY THROUGH AN ABOLITIONIST LENS

Here I apply an abolitionist critique to examples of mainstream reentry programs, providing an explicit contrast between traditional and abolitionist reentry, to illustrate the problems discussed earlier, and how we might approach reentry differently. This also helps us understand what characteristics allow one to identify a program or approach as reformist/carceral or non-reformist/abolitionist and how abolitionist approaches to reentry respond to the critiques of ordinary reentry work I have made thus far.

Abolitionist Reentry: Contrasting Traditional and Abolitionist Approaches

Traditional Approaches to Reentry

First, I will discuss several examples of traditional, mainstream approaches to reentry, in order to illustrate precisely where these kinds of programs are problematic. Among the most common are cognitive behavioral, employment, substance abuse, as well as "wrap around" programs that provide a combination of these services. The programs I look at here, I have chosen through purposive sampling, and found through the National Institute of Justice's crimesolutions.gov website, a clearinghouse of programs that have all gone through rigorous evaluation. I have chosen them based on the following criteria: a) they are among the most common forms of programming, b) they have been evaluated as "effective" or "promising" by at least one academic study, c) they cater to adults, and d) they are based in the United States.[8] I will provide a discussion following a brief description of each program.

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[8] I have chosen these criteria c and d for purposes of maintaining consistency across comparisons.

ComALERT

Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together (ComALERT) is a highly praised reentry program based in Brooklyn, New York, started in 1999 by the Kings County District Attorney's Office, and described by Jacob and Western (2007) as "among a new generation of prisoner re-entry programs around the country" (p. 1), providing "wraparound" transitional services such as substance abuse treatment and counseling, GED classes, job placement assistance, health insurance enrollment, and transitional housing to aid people recently released from prison in their transitions into Brooklyn communities. Its goal is to reduce recidivism of individuals on parole through this provision of services (National Institute of Justice, 2011).

Twenty-four to forty-eight hours upon release from prison, individuals may be referred to the program through the NY State Division of Parole. They are then reviewed by a ComALERT substance abuse counselor and given a psychological assessment. If admitted to the program, they are directed to the ComALERT Reentry Center, where they are assigned a social worker. Participants are mandated to attend weekly one-on-one therapy and outpatient substance abuse treatment. ComALERT participants are also referred to the "Ready, Willing, & Able" (RWA) program, offering opportunities for employment, transitional housing, vocational training, financial management, life-skills courses, and twelve-step meetings. RWA also provides opportunities for full-time employment in manual labor fields, primarily street cleaning jobs, with a portion of their earnings being deposited into a mandatory savings account. In addition, the program offers vocational training in food service, commercial driving, and pest control fields, and assists participants in finding permanent employment. Participants also receive computer and literacy classes and tutoring, are offered residence at a temporary housing facility for up to a year, and are referred to outside programs if needed. Nine months into their time with

RWA, clients enter a job search process stage, and once they obtain regular employment of some sort, they complete the program, and are given two hundred dollars a month for five months post-completion. The program administers random drug tests to participants; a positive test results in expulsion from the program.

ComALERT works with the Division of Parole to monitor participants through the three- to six-month duration of their time in the program and inform parole officers of any violations. The program is funded through initiatives such as the Second Chance Act, has been positively evaluated for its recidivism-reducing power, and is rated as "promising" according to the National Institute of Justice's crimesolutions.gov website.

Jacob and Western's (2007) evaluation found that 39.2 percent of participants were rearrested, compared to 47.6 percent of control group members. The program's "promising" rating is based on the fact that 15 percent fewer participants are likely to be rearrested two years upon release from prison than a comparison group, and two years after release, 27.8 percent of participants had been reconvicted, compared to 34.2 percent of control group members. Employment rates, they note, are almost twice as high among ComALERT graduates.

MINNCOR and MINNCOR EMPLOY

The Minnesota Department of Corrections industry program, MINNCOR, describes its goal as being "to provide offenders job skills and training to support positive behavior and successful transition into the community" (Minncor Industries, n.d.). It is located in six institutions throughout the state and employs approximately thirteen hundred incarcerated people. It provides products made by incarcerated workers, such as furniture, custodial products, industrial garments, as well as services and subcontract manufacturing such as packaging,

assembly, and cabinet making to government agencies, nonprofits, schools, and cities (ibid.). In 2006, MINNCOR began its EMPLOY program. According to the NIJ's crimesolutions.gov website and MINNCOR's own website, EMPLOY, run by the Minnesota Department of Corrections, was designed to reduce recidivism by aiding participants in securing and retaining employment post-release.

EMPLOY is a voluntary program to which individuals must apply, and maintain a clean disciplinary record throughout their participation. The program begins several months before release and continues for their first year out. Once accepted into the program, participants work with a "job training specialist" two to three months before release for two training sessions focused on skills assessment, resume writing, and interviewing skills. A week before their release, a "job development specialist" searches for potential jobs for the participant, reaches out to potential employers and advocates on their behalf regarding their employability. And after release, a "job retention specialist" meets with the participant and provides them with an employment portfolio containing the participant's own documents (resume, certifications), potential jobs, and other resources such as bus fare to aid their job search.

Duwe (2017) looked at recidivism and post-release employment outcomes for 464 individuals released from Minnesota prisons between 2006 and 2008. Participation in the program was found to reduce likelihood of recidivism by 32-63 percent, likelihood of rearrest by 35 percent, likelihood of reincarceration by 55 percent, and increased the odds of obtaining employment by 72 percent. Participants in the program were also 63 percent less likely to have their parole revoked for a technical violation.

Post-Secondary Correctional Education

To look at an example of post-secondary education (PSE) rehabilitation/reentry programs, rather than choose a single program, I have instead chosen to draw from a particular report from the Urban Institute that looks at four PSE programs in three different states (Winterfield, Coggeshall, Burke-Storer, Correa, and Tidd, 2009). These programs offer college-level academic or vocational courses either through correspondence or face-to-face instruction. Their primary goal is to reduce recidivism rates; their secondary goal to increase self-esteem and reduce misbehavior during incarceration. The Urban report found, through qualitative focus group data as well as quantitative recidivism data, that the programs accomplished both of these goals (National Institute of Justice, 2017).

Abolitionist Critique

Each of the programs described here provide important services to people coming out of prison, and they successfully reduce recidivism. One might wonder what exactly the problem is. Why take issue with them? From the conventional reform paradigm, there is no problem; this is what successful programs do. However, when looking at them alongside abolitionist reentry approaches, other issues come to the surface; the application of an abolitionist perspective brings to light a number of faults with these programs. 1) They attempt to address problems such as substance abuse, lack of education, and difficulty with employment post-release without questioning how these problems developed in the first place and without situating the issues in the larger social context from which they emerge, which need to be dealt with if any attempted solution is going to be lasting and effective. As Byrd (2016) puts it:

> Mainstream criminologists highlight the legal and de facto sanctions and barriers that result from a felony record, from education and employment to housing and health care.

However, these barriers are rarely analyzed as a function of broader systems of inequality (p. 14).

2) Relatedly, these approaches all have in common the fact that they remain stuck in attempting to address these issues through individual-level interventions. Byrd (ibid.) points this out as well, continuing: "barriers to reentering society are framed as emanating from the inner life and lack of self-governance of the returning prisoner" (p. 14). The NIJ's crimsolutions.gov entry on PSE programs notes that part of the justification for their existence is the fact that "[o]n average, prison inmates are less educated than the general public." So, the idea behind providing post-secondary education is to help people released from prison successfully reenter society by equipping them with basic skills in math, reading, and writing, and increasing their odds of gainful employment by improving their academic and vocational skills (National Institute of Justice, 2017). Both the NIJ entry and the URBAN report fail to even mention, let alone discuss the fact that most individuals with educational deficits are poor people of color, that these populations are systematically deprived of education and many other things that reduce one's likelihood of being incarcerated.

The language from MINNCOR's website describing the mission and goals of its programs exhibits the same problem:

> MINNCOR exists for the primary purpose of providing offender job skill training, meaningful employment, and teaching proper work habits – without burdening the tax payer. Correctional industries provide a means to minimize offender idleness and reduce costly disruptive behavior…contributing to…a safe and secure environment for both staff and offenders…In 2006, MINNCOR created the EMPLOY program to help releasing offenders find employment and become productive, tax-paying citizens…[It] seeks to teach offenders to capitalize on vocational training and job skills learning while incarcerated and apply them to employment opportunities once released (Minncor Industries, n.d.) .

Structural inequalities such as lack of education, lack of job skills, substance abuse problems—issues that these programs purport to address—are cast here as individual deficiencies, as if "offender idleness" and "costly disruptive behavior" were actually the source of the problem. Even the medical language of interventions like ComALERT, and the "treatment" they provide, gives the impression that the individual is the appropriate target for intervention (Byrd, 2016), "situating pathology and accountability entirely within the individual 'offender'" (Burch, 2017, p. 358). This is not to say that there should never be programs that address individual issues, but it is important for them to be situated within a larger context, for the grounding assumptions and values of such programs to be guided by a critical analysis of why the carceral system exists and what purposes it serves, for the "rehabilitative" process to include, perhaps, political education to help the people going through them understand the collective, social-structural circumstances of their individual difficulties (Currie, 2013; Goddard and Myers, 2017). This kind of political education has been shown to be an effective tool in helping people not only successfully reintegrate, but build a sense of community involvement, identity, belonging, and agency (Burch, 2016; Keahiolalo-Karasuda, 2008; Goddard and Myers, 2017; Shigematsu, D'Arcangelis, and Burch, 2008).[9]

   3) Another related issue with these programs is that their evaluations and their corresponding outcome measures of "success" provide little in the way of quality of life standards for their participants. The ComALERT program's standards of success are decreased recidivism, rearrest, and reconviction. MINNCOR's standards are detailed more precisely in their official "Strategic Plan 2018" report (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2018): in addition to recidivism reduction, they include such standards as "offenders work or are involved

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[9] This idea is discussed further below.

in programming," (6), "offender compliance" with things like child support orders and restitution payments, "offenders complete chemical dependency programming" and other forms of treatment. The PSE evaluation is the only one that includes any discussion of outcomes relating to quality of life. The authors describe some of the effects of PSE programming as including increased self-esteem and pride in their education accomplishments. However, among these, they describe another positive outcome that is particularly problematic: a new, positive attitude about their incarceration. This invokes a larger critique often made of such programs, namely that many reformist reform approaches merely help people to "better endure unjust social conditions" (Goddard and Myers, 2017, p. 130), as opposed to actually addressing these conditions.

   4) Another abolitionist critique of the kinds of programs discussed here, which allows one to identify them as carceral reform approaches, has to do with the language they use. Language is a powerful tool for constructing meaning, and determining how we think about the concepts we use. Some abolitionists and abolitionist organizations have zeroed in on the effects of oppressive language where the criminal punishment system is concerned, because certain words and terms carry with them certain assumptions about the people and the concepts they describe (Agid et al, n.d.; Ellis, n.d.). Critical Resistances notes in their Abolitionist Toolkit:

> these…assumptions make the PIC seem logical and necessary. They redefine people and actions in terms of the category or idea represented by the word. In this way a person becomes a criminal, and the act of the State putting someone in a cage becomes justice (Agid et al, n.d)

For instance, the terms 'criminal' and 'offender' assume criminality, which legitimates the often unjust laws that lead these individuals to be labeled as such, and legitimates the circumstances that have led them to be saddled with that label, while maintaining the blame entirely upon them. The term 'inmate,' as noted in the first footnote in the introduction of this dissertation, carries

with it certain connotations born of its use in carceral settings, such as individuals being referred to by correctional officers as 'inmate' or their identification numbers rather than by their names, erasing any aspect of their identities outside of their status as incarcerated people. 'Inmate,' 'prisoner,' 'criminal,' 'felon,' and 'offender' are all examples of terms that place people's status as law-breakers or as incarcerated, before their status as human beings, and that define people by this one aspect of their identity rather than considering them to be whole people (La Vigne, 2016).

Another common critique in this area is that some of these terms de-politicize the reality of incarceration, criminalization, and the circumstances that lead to it (Hickman, 2015). A fair number of social justice organizations, groups, and non-profits include a statement or discussion regarding the importance of 'person-first' language for talking about people under criminal punishment system control, language that centers people's humanity, rather than their criminality (Agid et al, n.d; Ellis, n.d.; Hickman, 2015; La Vigne, 2016; Osborne Association, n.d.). The City of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors has even proposed an official resolution that would require words like "felon," "offender," "convict," "parolee," and "delinquent" to be substituted with terms such as "formerly incarcerated person," "person under supervision" (Matier, 2019). While there is no universal agreement about which terms ought to be used, most sources tend to agree that "criminal," and "offender" are among the most problematic, with "inmate" and "prisoner" also being widely agreed upon among those engaged in social justice work, as terms that should be avoided.

A major characteristic of reformist approaches, criminal punishment interventions, and programs is their unreflective use of terms like "offender," illustrated by each of the examples described here—the programs' websites, in their reports and other literature, the research reports

evaluating them, and the NIJ website descriptions cataloging them. The MINNCOR website even includes a photo gallery with captions such as "MINNCOR Offender Assembling Wooden Object", and "MINNCOR Offender Working with Fabric". Here, they are not only referred to as "offenders" but as "MINNOCOR Offenders," as if MINNCOR has some sort of ownership over them (Minncor Industries, n.d.).

5) Yet another problematic aspect of these kinds of interventions is their failure to incorporate the expertise and authority of currently incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or otherwise system-impacted people in the development and delivery of these programs. An abolitionist critique of carceral reform efforts is their extensive use of experts and professionals[10] who have never experienced what the subjects of these programs have—never lived in violent neighborhoods, experienced mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement, been addicted to drugs, shot, incarcerated, or under any form of correctional supervision. "Safety," "justice," and "accountability"—terms that appear frequently within carceral rhetoric—look very different from the perspective of system-impacted people, compared to how they are defined by professionals, academics, and other experts. For instance, "public safety" in these contexts is not usually understood as safety for those who are most vulnerable, from state-sanctioned violence— in the form of police violence and occupation, environmental injustice, lack of investment in healthcare and education in impacted communities—in addition to freedom from harm and

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[10] Throughout this dissertation there will be a frequent critique of "experts," "professionals," and sometimes "researchers". I would like to make several clarifications in this regard. In the context of discussing reformist/carceral reforms, my use of the terms "experts" and "professionals" refer primarily to those who work in corrections or corrections-affiliated institutions and industries, in charge of administering "treatment" to incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people. When I use the term "researchers," also in the context of reformist/carceral reforms, I am referring to criminologists and sociologists whose work can be located squarely in traditional evidence-based paradigms, that has been used to bolster punitive policies, and that tend to pathologize their incarcerated and formerly incarcerated research "subjects," such as the work discussed in Chapter 1. Finally, I use the terms "academics," "scholars," and sometimes "researchers," to refer to those outside of the context of carceral reforms, whose work aims at reflexivity, and who are engaged in more collaborative efforts of knowledge production *with*, rather than simply *about*, impacted people and communities (among whom I place myself and my own work). I take up the discussion of this kind of work more extensively in the concluding chapter.

freedom from street violence. "Accountability," in its most common understanding in carceral contexts, means accountability of "offenders" for the crimes for which they have been convicted, as opposed to accountability of state institutions, government representatives, law enforcement, and every other structure, system, or institution that has helped produce the racist, classist conditions of oppression in contemporary society. "Justice," under the carceral paradigm, means punishment, and is equated with a number of years someone is kept in a cage—not freedom from harm, oppression, subjugation, racism, classism, or reparations to black people for centuries of harm and mistreatment.

An abolitionist reform would, at minimum, center the experience and expertise of impacted individuals and communities. An abolitionist take on reentry reform maintains that any interventions intended to help incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people should be designed and implemented by those who have been through the system themselves. Within the current reform paradigm, directly impacted people are rarely considered experts or authorities on their own experience or the prison system, with which they are more intimately familiar than almost anyone else. An abolitionist perspective highlights the importance of empowering directly impacted people and their families and communities to make their own decisions about what accountability, safety, justice, and resisting oppression means to them. The idea that some of the greatest source of knowledge for ideas about how to transform our current system are those who have experienced it firsthand is alarmingly absent from mainstream discussions about how to address the problems we currently face. It also aids these individuals in cultivating skills such as collaboration, leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution (Goddard and Myers, 2017; INCITE! 2007; Focus Initiatives, n.d.; Spade, 2020). Many abolitionist organizations have been doing this for decades, but this practice should be the rule, not the exception. Among the

strongest abolitionist organizations and interventions, examples of which will be discussed

below, are those that are actually led and built, from the ground up, by impacted people, and

operate based on concepts of safety, justice, and accountability defined by those most impacted,

driven by goals of equity, equal access to opportunities, equal distribution of resources, and

freedom from harm for all people.

6) Another distinguishing feature of carceral reform efforts is that their funding source is,

or is in some way linked to, the punishment system. Despite its collaboration with the Doe Fund

and its Ready Willing and Able program—which does appear to honor person-first language

(The Doe Fund, 2020), in addition to employing some of its graduates (ibid.)—ComALERT

works with the Division of Parole and is directly run by the local district attorney's office.

Therefore, not only is it financially linked to the punishment system, but it is situated within it.

MINNCOR is a division of the Minnesota Department of Corrections, whose funding comes

directly from the revenue it generates through prison labor. While information regarding funding

sources for Post-secondary Education programs is harder to come by, those evaluated in the

URBAN report are funded at least in part through Incarcerated Youth Offender (IYO) block

grants, or other state higher education grants. The sources of IYO grants themselves are

somewhat obscure, however, at least in California, these are issued through the California Board

of State and Community Corrections (Justicegrants.info, n.d.)—obviously part of the carceral

state.

7) Finally, another characteristic of traditional, reformist reform approaches in reentry,

from the perspective of an abolitionist analysis, is that they look to the punishment system to

"solve" problems that the punishment system itself creates and perpetuates. Mainstream reform

efforts do not work to question the logics of the prison system, but instead employ that very logic

in its attempts to address problems with that system. Reform in these contexts is not separate

from carceral logic, but as Foucault pointed out "[p]rison 'reform'…constitutes, as it were, its

programme" (Foucault, 1995, p. 234). And in this sense, they ultimately serve an even more

nefarious purpose, namely, to help render and recast the prison system as legitimate, to help it

become more adaptable and effective (Byrd, 2016). Abolitionism understands that that the

carceral state is the product of "deeper sociohistorical and political-economic causes" (Nixon et

al, 2008, p. 22) of race and class-related oppression and exploitation; it understands the

punishment system as a central tool of social control. Because abolitionism is, at its root, about

transforming systems of oppression and exploitation, it understands that an appropriate approach

to transformation requires not merely making modifications to the punishment system, but

addressing the historical conditions that make it possible for such a system to evolve and exist,

and targeting social conditions that lead to things like mass, discriminatory imprisonment in the

first place, such as poverty, inequality, structural racism, white supremacy, and capitalism.

Mainstream reentry reform fails to critically engage these social and historical circumstances; it

maintains the belief and projects to the public the idea that a solution can be found within the

system itself, while "the basic premise of locking people in cages remains unquestioned" (Byrd

2016, 15). As Kaba (2021) observes, prisons themselves are a reform of earlier forms of

punishment.

Gorz (1967)—the progenitor of the reformist/non-reformist reform distinction—explains

that a non-reformist reform "is one which is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the

framework of a given system of administration, but in view of what should be made possible in

terms of human needs and demands" (Gorz, 1967, pp. 7-8). In other words, the goal of

improving people's lives should drive these changes. Conceptually, many reformist reformers

would likely agree with this, however when reforms are assessed not only in terms of their goals, but in terms of their actual impacts, we see that the reformist reform perspective falls short. Furthermore, reformist reform approaches do precisely what Gorz is pointing out; they are conceived "in terms of what is possible within the framework" of the current system, rather than being fundamentally driven by a deep understanding of people's needs, and a pursuit of their genuine well-being, independently of, and unconstrained by, what the current system has to offer.

Abolitionist Reentry

Here, I will provide a comparable discussion of abolitionist reentry programs and efforts, looking at four organizations, and illustrating how their approaches respond to the major issues with traditional reentry raised here. I have used purposive sampling to choose these programs according to the following criteria: a) they self-identify as abolitionist, b) they are grassroots, c) they are run by members of a community involved in abolitionist activism, d) they serve adults, and e) they are based in the U.S.

FOCUS Initiatives LTD

Forever on Course United in Solidarity (FOCUS) Initiatives LTD is a nonprofit reentry effort in Marion County, Indiana, that self-identifies as abolitionist. They are a grassroots, community-based program that offers legal aid, housing, case management, medical and mental health services, education, community organizing, and employment opportunities both in-house and in local businesses with which they are partnered (Focus Initiatives n.d.)

On the surface, the kinds of services they offer do not appear to differ significantly from those offered by ComALERT. However, there are several components that distinguish FOCUS. The first of these is in their ideological approach and the fundamental assumptions, values, and principles that guide their implementation. They approach reentry from a perspective "that takes into account the underlying or 'root' causes of mass incarceration" (ibid.), a perspective that understands the political, economic, and social forces that put people into the punishment system and determine their treatment once there. FOCUS operates from an understanding that "the prison system is designed to keep people incarcerated, not to rehabilitate them or prepare them for a successful future" (ibid.) and, as a tool of race and class stratification, is designed to uphold racial capitalism, and patriarchal, white supremacist, heteronormative structures.

Another major difference that distinguishes FOCUS from traditional, mainstream, carceral reform approaches is that currently and formerly incarcerated people designed and developed their program and its projects in collaboration with allies in the community. Their leadership is structured around and driven by the experience and expertise of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. FOCUS explains that their plans for additional phases of the program include "aim[ing] for all coordinator positions to be held by current or former program members, and for the majority of the directors of our non-profit organization to be people who have experienced incarceration" (ibid.).

Yet another distinguishing feature of FOCUS is their goals. In contrast to the goals of programs such as MINNCOR, which aims to "hold offenders accountable" and "change offender behavior" (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2018), FOCUS articulates its goals as follows:

> our goal, as an abolitionist re-entry project, is to support formerly incarcerated people and communities targeted by the criminal legal system in their efforts to determine their own futures according to their own needs and desires. We hope to help build resilient

communities, and reinforce already existing communities, so that they are able to support people returning from prison, and through solidarity, overcome the oppressive forces of racial capitalism that drive mass incarceration (Focus Initiatives, n.d.).

This set of goals reflects an understanding that individual-level obstacles people face before and after prison, such as difficulty finding meaningful, gainful employment, and lack of education, are not the product of individual failures and shortcomings, but structural problems requiring structural solutions, to which carceral approaches contribute, rather than solve. It reflects an understanding that truly addressing these problems requires looking for and building solutions outside the criminal punishment apparatus. This includes building resilient communities and strengthening solidarity to counter the oppressive forces of racial capitalism. FOCUS does this through empowering system-impacted people and communities to determine for themselves what their needs are, what "safety," "accountability," and "justice" mean to them, rather than having these determined for them by "experts" and "professionals" who have never experienced violence, exploitation, and oppression at the hands of the system. FOCUS maintains these goals with the explicit intention of "go[ing]beyond helping individuals, to changing the conditions that have produced mass incarceration" (ibid.).

FOCUS receives funding from grassroots campaigns, soliciting donations, and developing partnerships with local like-minded organizations, such as Mutton Creek Farm, which plans to make training and employment opportunities available in sustainable agricultural fields.

Finally, FOCUS distinguishes itself from carceral reentry reforms in terms of the standards it sets itself for measuring whether or not it has achieved these goals. Rather than recidivism reduction or "offender behavior," they explain that they "will evaluate the success of our program on the basis of its effectiveness in supporting members in developing their sense of

empowerment and self-efficacy, and making progress toward their goals" (ibid.)—goals which,

again, are determine by them, not imposed upon them by anyone who presumes to know what is

good for reentering people without being one themselves. Byrd (2016) explains that abolitionist

reentry praxis "would center the knowledge of formerly imprisoned people to create and foster

spaces for the development of their knowledge and leadership" (p. 93). A program that sets the

empowerment, self-efficacy, and self-determination of currently and formerly incarcerated

people as a measure of its success and addresses reentry-related problems by targeting conditions

that produce mass imprisonment qualifies as abolitionist reentry praxis.

Black and Pink

Black and Pink is a national nonprofit organization whose aim is to abolish the criminal

punishment system and provide support for system-impacted LGBTQ+ individuals through

advocacy, service provision, and organizing (Black and Pink, 2019). The organization's founder

was incarcerated at the time it was created in 2005, and it is comprised of currently and formerly

incarcerated people and allies. Black and Pink runs a number of programs, including a prison–

pen pal program, a national advocacy coalition, a youth leadership institute, and two reentry

programs. One of their reentry programs is Restore. Embolden. Amplify. Power. (REAP), which

works to strengthen community-based programming that serves the LGBTQ+ community, and

seeks to address reentry challenges faced by queer and transgender formerly incarcerated

individuals (many of which overlap with those of reentering people who are not queer or

transgender), such as "lack of quality and safe residency, medical care, employment and self-

development" (Black and Pink, 2019). They describe their TRANSitions program, which works

together with REAP, as "a conduit for safe housing specifically for formerly incarcerated transgender women who are particularly vulnerable" (ibid.).

Black and Pink's approach as one that responds to the critiques of carceral reforms raised here is evidenced by both their method for approaching projects and the language on which they rely. They explain that one of their goals with TRANSitions is to "build a new vision for what reentry looks like" (ibid.). They do this in a number of ways, firstly by situating the social problems they attempt to solve in a larger social context. In their coalition work, they aim to "approach issues of policing, punishment and criminalization through a racial, economic and reproductive justice framework" (ibid.). REAP's approach shows an understanding of the fact that social phenomena like crime and cycles of recidivism need to be understood in the context in which they take place if they are going to be truly addressed.

It also reflects an understanding that the punishment system is itself a major contributor to these problems. REAP "support[s] formerly incarcerated people to do direct service work and plac[ement] in leadership roles" (ibid.), illustrating the importance of not only incorporating the experience and expertise of people who have been through the system, but their leadership as well. Black and Pink does this through creating and supporting community-based programming, to "create opportunities for formerly incarcerated people to create a quality of life that *they* dictate without barriers or ceilings" (ibid., italics added). This not only allows system-impacted people to define for themselves what their goals and needs are and what they take to be good measures of a successful life, but does so without placing that responsibility entirely upon them. Program emphasis on community, coalition building, and organizing demonstrates an understanding that these issues are not solved merely by targeting currently and formerly incarcerated people for intervention.

Finally, Black and Pink's commitment to incorporating the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people helps demonstrate their status as an abolitionist reform organization. For example, they conducted a national survey of incarcerated LGBTQ+ individuals entitled "Coming Out of Concrete Closets," which was designed with the collaboration of incarcerated people, not simply academics and industry professionals, and made available to incarcerated people, not confined to academic journals or professional forums. The report includes a list of currently incarcerated people's needs, developed by incarcerated individuals as opposed to being imposed upon them, as is the case with risk assessment models, where incarcerated people's needs are determined independently of their input, according to a clinical diagnostic model. Furthermore, they explain that the report is a tool for organizers, both inside and outside of prisons, "to strengthen national campaigns and grassroots efforts to alleviate the immediate suffering of prisoners and bring an end to the prison industrial complex while center[ing] the needs of LGBTQ prisoners" (Lydon, Carrington, Low, Miller, and Yazdy, 2015, p. 3). In this sense, their work contributes to building power in local communities and does not place responsibility entirely upon impacted people, therefore differing significantly in its practices, principles, values, and ideology, from mainstream reentry and rehabilitation approaches.

They employ person-first language throughout their website, and while they do use the word "prisoner" in this report, they do so consciously and with specific justification and intent, having taken into consideration how the people they are describing would like to be referred to:

> In our survey, we asked respondents what term they preferred to refer to themselves: prisoner, inmate, incarcerated person, person who is incarcerated, or other. We also left a blank space for respondents to offer their own suggestions. The majority of respondents chose "other." In the blank space, most respondents wrote in their name or simply, "my name." Given that there was no general agreement on terminology from respondents,

we use the word "prisoner" as an identifying term for all incarcerated individuals. We intentionally use the term "prisoner" as it connects to the political reality of incarceration and aligns with the history of the Prisoner Rights Movement, of which we consider Black & Pink to be a part (pp. 13-14).

Dignity and Power Now's Forever Rooted

Dignity and Power Now (DPN) is a Los Angeles-based grassroots organization founded in 2012 by Black Lives Matter's cofounder Patrisse Cullors. DPN aims to fight for the dignity and power of incarcerated people, their families, and communities, and to build an abolitionist movement led by Black and Brown people, "rooted in community power toward the goal of achieving transformative justice and healing justice" (Dignity and Power Now, n.d.). They run activist and health and wellness programs, coalitions to halt jail construction and end law enforcement violence, and leadership institutions for people coming home from prison and system-impacted youth, all grounded in principles of abolition, healing justice, and transformative justice.

Since transformative justice is an important concept in the conversation about abolition, I will briefly explain it now. Transformative justice is an alternative form of justice to punitive, carceral justice, characterized by different goals, principles, values, and practices. It "seeks safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, or State or systemic violence, including incarceration or policing" (Kershnar, Haines, Harkins, Greig, Wiesner, Levy, Shah, Kim, and Carr, 2007). [11] Like restorative justice, it understands "crimes" as the result of unmet needs, and seeks to address harms. But unlike restorative justice, its goal is not to restore to conditions as they existed before the harm occurred, maintaining that structural conditions that

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[11] Where the intention is to reference alternative forms of healing, liberatory justice that are independent of state institutions and processes, I will sometimes refer to transformative justice and abolition interchangeably. However, there are important ways in which abolition and transformative justice differ from one another. The primary one being that I take abolition to refer not only to the building up of such alternatives, but also to the dismantling of current oppressive systems. While in some contexts transformative justice is understood to include this component as well, throughout this dissertation I will assume this distinction.

allow violence to occur must be addressed "in order to achieve justice in individual instance of violence" (transformharm.org). Instead, its aim is to fundamentally transform conditions that allowed the harm to occur in the first place. Transformative justice "works to actively resist the state's criminal injustice system" (ibid.) and proceeds from a critical analysis that "recognizes that oppression is at the root of all forms of harm, abuse, and assault. As a practice, it therefore aims to address and confront those oppressions on all levels and treats this concept as an integral part to accountability and healing" (ibid.). It takes individual and collective liberation and justice as inextricably interconnected; it seeks to create both immediate safety and long-term healing. Transformative justice involves much more than just addressing situations of interpersonal harm, but also includes wealth and resource redistribution efforts, divestment/reinvestment initiatives, mutual aid, and more.

One of DPN's programs is Forever Rooted, a "leadership development series geared toward people coming home from prison" (ibid.). Where a traditional reentry/rehabilitation program will usually prescribe some form of "evidence-based" "treatment" developed by professionals and applied according to the dictates of risk-needs assessments, Forever Rooted "uses listening, story-telling, and facilitation skills to amplify the leadership and empowerment of formerly incarcerated people" (ibid.). DPN is an organization that fundamentally comprehends the social, historical, and structural context of reentry; their goal is not just for participants to obtain employment, stay clean, and avoid recidivism, but to equip them with leadership skills to empower themselves. Reentering people, their families, and communities— under the leadership of system-impacted individuals—are given opportunities to "imagine and build alternatives to existing models of public safety, amplify the resilience of participants and their communities…and broaden the movement towards prison abolition, healing justice, and

transformative justice" (ibid.). Forever Rooted and DPN are targeting structural, in addition to

individual issues, and they look outside the punishment system to build solutions, through

working to strengthen communities, and create noncarceral, community-based systems of justice.

Not all of Dignity and Power Now's programs explicitly target reentry, and they cannot

in any traditional sense be called reentry programs, however they directly address issues that

arise in rehabilitation and reentry. For instance, DPN has a number of rapid response programs to

address emergencies on the street which provide alternatives to policing, such as police de-

escalation, street medics, therapists, counselors, and other practitioners and/or healers. This kind

of holistic alternative approach can greatly reduce the possibility of further system contact that

would land people behind bars. Additionally, DPN participates in JusticeLA, a coalition of other

organizations and individuals working, quite successfully, with impacted communities to oppose

the construction of new carceral facilities in Los Angeles. If there are fewer prisons and jails,

there will be less people for whom reentry is a problem at all.

Addressing community trauma is another essential aspect of the work that organizations

like DPN undertake. To this end, they also provide a Healing Justice Toolkit for the public, free

on their website, to help people train themselves and others and learn how to respond to

emergencies in ways that help reduce the possibility of system contact (Dignity and Power Now,

2019). They note that "as much as we need rapid response physically, [we] also need to deal with

the trauma inflicted on families…[and] on the community" (p. 3), thus they not only respond to

urgent issues but work to create an infrastructure of ongoing healing and safety, so that

communities can be self-sustaining in this respect. They offer community wellness services

through their Building Resilience group, such as acupuncture, massage, yoga, art and live

performances, and children's stations. They offer these in impacted communities, as well as right

outside jails, to provide support for families visiting loved ones behind bars. They offer all these services free of charge. Among their explicit goals with these efforts are "address[ing] intergenerational trauma among Black and Brown Communities," (Dignity and Power Now, n.d.) and "transforming and ending systems of oppression to create a world in which people are healthy and care for each other" (ibid.) through collective practices of healing justice. This set of responses reflects a profoundly structural understanding of the social issues surrounding reentry. While community-based approaches such as these, if not implemented on a larger scale, cannot by themselves entirely address the effect of forces such as disinvestment, mass joblessness, austerity-driven social policies, and the absence of universal healthcare, they provide a smaller-scale blueprint for their potential reproduction across similarly impacted communities that may counter these larger-scale forces. Through comprehending the true scope of these problems as requiring holistic, transformative, empowering, care-based, noncarceral solutions, they provide options for communities to build up a minimum baseline of self-sustainability, repair, and healing.

Initiate Justice

Initiate Justice (IJ) is another organization that uses an abolitionist approach to reentry and related issues. IJ was founded in 2016 by two incarcerated individuals and describes its mission as ending mass incarceration "by activating the power of the people it directly impacts" (Initiate Justice, 2020). IJ is one hundred percent led by directly impacted people and works to achieve its goals by organizing inside and outside members through this specifically inside-outside strategy, prioritizing the leadership and voices of those most directly impacted. They work to provide resources for political education for those inside, train members both inside and

out in policy change work and legislative processes, work in the community and behind bars to create concrete legal change, publish reports, surveys, and media "that change the narrative about people impacted by incarceration and position impacted people as leaders in the CA criminal justice reform movements" (ibid.).

IJ runs an Institute of Impacted Leaders training, similar to DPN's Forever Rooted campaign, which is a twelve-week long training program specifically for people directly impacted by the punishment system, where participants learn how to organize, advocate for themselves and incarcerated loved ones, and change state laws. The program includes an advocacy day at the California State Capitol and other hands-on work passing on leadership training to inside organizers. Some of their current legal campaigns include securing voting rights for individuals on parole, eliminating copayments for medical and dental services for incarcerated people, and expanding credit earnings for those eligible for youth and elderly parole (Initiate Justice, 2020).

IJ's approach reflects an abolitionist position insofar as it demonstrates a fundamental understanding of the structural nature of criminal punishment issues and works specifically to place directly impacted people as leaders in making change. It is also abolitionist in that it does not rely on the current punishment system. Instead, it works to build power and alternatives outside the system, in communities, situating incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people as leaders, and does not direct its change efforts merely at individuals, and does not rely on weak measures for what a "successful" program is, or an individual's having "succeeded" means.[12]

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[12] A note on co-optation and compromise: In a discussion of alternative forms of justice, one would be remiss not to mention some of the ways that alternative practices and philosophies have become be co-opted and made into part of the carceral machinery in the recent past, notably so with restorative justice, but also more generally in the fight for criminal punishment system change. Any work of advocating for the use of such systems as alternatives must plan to avoid this co-opting. For instance, Ben-Moshe (2013) highlights the fact that restorative justice "is mainly advocated by white middle class activists" while "its roots are mainly within indigenous communities worldwide. As a result, many poor communities of and communities of

Lessons for Reentry from Abolition

When the major problems with current reforms in the areas of reentry are examined through an abolitionist lens, it casts them in a different light, illuminates different solutions, and provides concrete suggestions for how programs can be developed so that they actually address the problems for which they were created. We have just seen what these problems are, and specifically how abolitionists approach them differently. An abolitionist framing of reentry and its related issues helps us understand that it makes no sense to try to address them by targeting incarcerated or reentering individuals alone, because they are part of a much larger set of societal problems, relationships, structures, and dynamics that conventional framing of reentry does not take into consideration. If proposed solutions are to be successful in a meaningful and enduring way, they must involve engaging problems such as the poverty and inequality endemic to capitalism, colonialism, and the systemic and structural racism built into not only the criminal punishment system, but all U.S. social systems. They must bring a critical analysis to these, and look outside of the punishment system for solutions. Successful solutions seek means of achieving safety, conflict resolution, mediation, accountability, and justice without reliance on intervention from the state, from police or from prisons, understanding that state intervention often runs counter to the goals of peace and safety (Brown and Schept, 2016; Rodriguez, 2019). Abolitionist solutions attend to people's lived realities, their immediate material needs, at the same time as they work toward long-term visions for social and structural change (Akbar, 2018; McLeod, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019).

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color see this framework as a form of colonialism" (pp. 89-90). She suggests that "for restorative justice to be meaningful, it should come out of the communities it is trying to restore" (p. 90). I discuss the subject of co-optation further in Chapter 4.

Abolitionist approaches also have in common an understanding of harm—both harm perpetrated and harm experienced—as cyclical, non-binary,[13] and inextricably connected to systemic inequities, rather than as resulting from individual people or circumstances (Goddard and Myers 2018). This notion of harm provides an alternative picture for understanding how addressing problems of reentry and rehabilitation are not simply a matter of trying to target individuals for change. It also helps us in the work of linking crime and incarceration to the much larger scale problems that give rise to them, such as predatory capitalism and the white supremacist foundations of the U.S. and its institutions (Akbar 2018; McLeod 2019; Rodriguez 2019).

As I touched on briefly above, the abolitionist organizations and programs discussed here also illuminate the importance of incorporating political education into the process of working with incarcerated or reentering people and impacted communities. Currie's (2013) distinction between "transformative interventions" and "conformist interventions" helps to illustrate why this matters. Conformist interventions, he describes as being designed with the intention of getting individuals to accept the oppressive conditions in which they find themselves, and places the burden of change almost entirely upon those caught up in the system. Transformative interventions are intended to help people understand the larger social and structural context of their incarceration and the circumstances that led them there. These kinds of interventions are also intended to effect personal transformation through social and civic engagement in order to challenge those conditions. Scholars and abolitionist organizers and practitioners have attended to their success in doing so (Goddard and Myers, 2017; Keahiolalo-Karasuda, 2008; Shigematsu, D'Arcangelis, and Burch, 2008). In Burch's (2017) analysis of Susan Burton's A New Way of

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[13] Meaning, transcending the stereotypical and overly simplistic victim/offender binary, when in fact people are rarely just one or the other, but have often been both.

Life reentry program for women, Burch explains how Burton built her organization from one that worked to meet the immediate needs of women transitioning out of prison, to one that partnered with organizations like Critical Resistance and All of Us or None, to "build a critique of the punishment system into A New Way of Life's educational curriculum" (p. 369), and pursued other partnerships to enable the women in her program to engage in social justice activism and political action. "Steadily," Burch notes, "A New Way of Life reached beyond the traditional goal of preventing recidivism and became a program aimed simultaneously at personal transformation and transformation of the relations of power in which imprisonment is rooted" (p. 370). These ideas are also supported by Tribur's (2009) work which demonstrates that "critique of the system can actually protect (re)entering people from failure" (Burch, p. 370).

Relatedly, abolitionist approaches are grounded in a critical analysis of the system and mechanisms of oppression that produced the conditions the programs have been developed to address. They are based on an assumption that in many cases, state approaches "actively produce and exacerbate…harm" (Spade, 2020, p. 1), and that communities impacted by these harms can come together themselves to address the issues at hand, to simultaneously meet immediate needs, and contribute to building a movement for effecting and lasting progressive social transformation (Abolition Collective, 2020; Brown and Schept, 2017; Counterpower, 2020; Dixon, 2015; Dixon and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Kaba, 2021; Spade, 2020). This analysis of the structural conditions that produce problems such as criminalization, incarceration, and recidivism, also "help[s] to break stigma, shame, and isolation" (Spade, 2020, p. 13) that these issues often produce. Spade's (2020) description of this aspect of mutual aid projects provides an apt explanation of this phenomenon that speaks to the particular issues with mainstream reentry work I have been focusing on here:

Under capitalism, social problems resulting from exploitation and the maldistribution of resources are understood as individual moral failings, not systemic problems. Getting support at a place that sees the systems, not the people suffering in them, as the problem can help people move from shame to anger and defiance. Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative. This work is based in a belief that those on the front lines of a crisis have the best wisdom to solve the problems, and that collective action is the way forward (p. 13).

"Community"

Because the notion of "the community" is so central to abolitionist alternatives to punitively-based systems and institutions such as prisons, and in this case, reentry and rehabilitation programs, this discussion would not be complete without addressing, and somewhat problematizing, the notion of "the community". What, exactly, is "the community"? Who is it comprised of? What delimits it? Who decides this? The abolitionist literature is surprisingly lacking in conversations that address such questions, especially given how reliant abolitionist theory and praxis are on this concept. Thus far, I have used "the community" in the context of community-based programming, community-building, community allies, the importance of abolitionist movement-building being rooted in community power, community-based systems of justice, community wellness and wellness services, etc. "The community" is heavily referenced throughout abolitionist literature and work as the site, and often the source, of alternatives to carceral institutions and systems. In this section, I will discuss definitions of "community," some problems and complications with the concept and how it is used, including some of the ways that it has been romanticized, and finally, I will talk about abolitionist aspirations for what "community" means.

CounterPower describes the community, or community sphere as consisting of

groups of people who share a common historical identity and heritage. Historically this shared identity develops among members of a community living in close geographical

proximity. Today, the formation of communities also occurs with the transmission and circulation of various cultural affinities and artifacts through networks established by communication and transportation technologies. High-speed transportation grids and the Internet have both contributed to the formation of communities across great geographical distances…(p. 38).

In their book *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community,* Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge (2003) describe community as

> a group of people who have a shared interest. This common interest may be geographically related but need not be. It can also be a shared faith, a common daily experience…a shared desire to resolve an event or crisis in a good way, or a shared vision" (pp. xvi-xvii)

These descriptions begin to aid in constructing a definition of "the community" as comprised of a group of people in relatively close physical proximity, or sharing a common spatial location and locale (Kepe, 1999)—and part of the reason this is an important criterion when it comes to a discussion of abolitionist initiatives relates to the need for such proximity when it comes to addressing urgent situations of harm and violence (Dixon, 2015; Dixon and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Mingus, 2020). These descriptions also contribute to an understanding of the community as united by some common identity, and/or common interests, shared goals, and vision. Another essential component of the concept of "community" in abolitionist terms is that it is understood as contrasted with the state—community-based programs, community allies, community power, are conceptualized as independent of state funding, resources, and entities. This idea can get somewhat convoluted, as there are many abolitionist organizations and individuals who seek to—and do—accomplish their goals through forms of collaboration with state or government entities, such as boards of supervisors and city councils, or pursuing policy reform, and through these efforts, have succeeded in achieving things like budget reallocation from policing into education, or support for community-run mental health programs. Thus, the

understanding of community as being comprised of people and entities that are unconnected to

the state is not entirely black and white. To the extent that a "community" can be thought of as

united by a set of shared identities, goals, and values, a community and community initiatives

can maintain distinction from the state, despite perhaps sometimes receiving support from state

sources, through their adherence to values such as internal solidarity, commitment to abolitionist

and transformative principles, as well as autonomy in actions and decision-making.

There is a need to problematize the notion of "community" as it is used in abolitionist

thought and work, and in criminological and sociological scholarship more broadly. It is used

frequently in conversations about social justice, among scholars, activists, as well as politicians

and policymakers. And as Kepe (1999) notes, "it has also been recognized as being highly

elusive, with numerous competing interpretations" (p. 418). David Garland (2012) characterizes

a number of issues with the concept:

> A constantly recurring solution to the problem of the limitations of the criminal justice state
> has been the effort to relocate the work of crime control 'in the community'….arguments
> about the dangers and stigma of exclusion, and a belief in the healing powers of community
> relations, there has been a whole series of reform initiatives that identify the community as
> the proper locale for crime control and criminal justice. Since the 1960s we have seen the
> development of one community programme after another—community corrections,
> community policing, punishment in the community, community crime prevention,
> community prosecution, community justice. 'The community' has become the all-purpose
> solution to every criminal justice problem (p. 123).

While he's referring to the use of the term in the context of the criminal justice state, many of his

points here are applicable to the current discussion, such as, for instance, this idea of "the

community" as an "all-purpose solution," specifically in the context of how "the community" is

romanticized (Inwood, 2009; Young, 2001). There is a tendency to view it as "a wholesome,

homogenous entity waiting to be mobilized…seen to be the very antithesis of crime and…the

place and source of all safety" (Young, 2001, p. 26). The community is often "endowed with a simplistic and naïve purity and virtue" (Crawford, 1997, p. 153), and cast as the panacean solution to all problems of crime, injustice, and the criminal punishment system.

In their discussion of the concepts of "pods" and "pod-mapping"—an abolitionist, activist practice of building safety without relying on state intervention that involves charting and defining relationships in a person's immediate network that they would turn to for support and aid in situations of harm, violence, or abuse (discussed extensively in Chapter 5)—the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (Mingus, 2020) describes other problems surrounding the term "community":

> we had been using the term "community" when we talked about transformative justice, but we found that, not surprisingly, many people do not feel connected to a "community" and, even more so, most people did not know what "community" meant or had wildly different definitions and understandings of "community"…We found that people romanticized community; or though they felt connected to a community at large, they only had significant and trustworthy relationships with very few actual people who may or may not be part of that community…Although "community" is a word that we use all the time, many people don't know what it is or feel they have never experienced it. This became increasingly confusing as we used terms such as "community accountability" or "community responses to violence" and encouraged people to "turn to their communities" (Mingus, 2020, pp. 119-120).

This points to issues around the elusiveness of "community" that Kepe (1999) and others note: the lack of agreement about what exactly it means, and the lack of a singular definition that people using the term are working from. When it comes to the state, and policy, Kepe has suggested that the term can be helpful or harmful depending upon how it is used—that it is helpful when it serves to focus policy on the needs of poor and underserved people, but it can also be used to undermine the rights of such groups and ultimately benefit individuals, groups, and entities already in positions of power, particularly when the gap between policy and

implementation allows for a variety of interpretations of the term. Illustrating this argument in the context of implementing policies intended to bring progressive change to rural South Africa, Kepe explains:

> During the last few decades, for instance, representations of 'community' have been used as a basis for advocating stronger legal rights for and government recognition of community-based systems, and for shifting resource control away from the state towards rural people who are dependent on these resources for their livelihoods…however…these simplified notions of 'community' are also capable of doing damage when translated into more specific policy recommendations. Aid agencies, for instance, have often marginalized less organised groups (eg immigrants) that live in marginal areas and have no 'community' cohesion (Kepe, 1999, p. 417).

Of relevance here is "an understanding of who is acknowledged as belonging to the 'community'" (p. 421), which raises questions about community agency, and who makes decisions about what defines the boundaries of a community, the content of the cultural identity or shared goals, values, and visions that unite a community, whose voices represent a given community, who is included and who is excluded, and on what grounds. Kepe argues that "social actors in a particular locality should be given a major, but not exclusive, role in deciding who belongs to the community and who does not" (Kepe, 1999, p. 422), arguing that entirely external definitions of a community often create more internal problems and conflicts than they solve. Squires' (1997) position supports this argument; he remarks, "[i]t is not hard to detect the operation of a particularly selective conception of community or neighbourhood interests giving priority to certain traditional, even patriarchal, values – security, property, privacy and family". This point is relevant not only in a discussion about state entities and people in positions of power attempting to draw boundaries around communities and deciding who is included for motives other than purely desiring to aid a given community. As INCITE! points out, drawing on

Angela Davis's description of 'community,' this issue of internally versus externally decided

inclusion and exclusion is important when it comes to organizing and grassroots work as well:

> I do think it is extremely important not to assume that there are 'communities of color' out there fully formed, conscious of themselves, just waiting for vanguard organizers to mobilize them into action. You know some people might say that there are communities in themselves waiting for someone to transform them into communities for themselves, but I think that's a mistake. I think it's a mistake because we have to think about organizing as *producing* the communities, as generating community, as building communities of struggle (INCITE!, 2007, p. 161).

Kepe and Davis both raise the issue of communities that are not self-organized, that lack

cohesion. INCITE! offers the quote above to illustrate the importance for organizers not to see

the communities they work in and with as "clients" but as "potential comrades in a struggle for

social justice" (p. 161). INCITE! dedicates significant discussion to "reject[ing] the idea that

there is a fundamental difference" between organizers and the communities they work with. In

their discussion in the context of one organization in particular, Communities Against Rape and

Abuse (CARA), they explain:

> We understand ourselves as community members who are survivors of sexual and domestic violence and whose experience as survivors helps inform our work and accountability to our constituents. Staff/community boundaries are disrupted in a number of ways. We prioritize leadership development among the people we organize, which results in many of those individuals eventually being hired as interns or staff, or becoming board members. We organize regular community gatherings, parties, and meals to facilitate community building among CARA workers, out families, our constituents, and even the people who live in the neighborhood where our office is located.. Our own families are what we're talking about when we're organizing these communities (p. 160).

This approach that CARA and many abolitionist organizations take to their relationship with

their communities helps address another issue around the notion of "community" that is raised in

the literature, and that is the issue of representation. Problems arise when anyone who is not a

part of that community makes decisions or purports to act in its interest, or on its behalf (Squires,

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1997). While this does not entirely resolve the question of who "counts" as a member of a community, who decides, and who defines those terms, it contributes to an understanding of what it looks like for an organization to be part of a community.

Because "community" in abolitionist terms is also talked about as a unit upon which healing interventions are made, and to be made, but also as a source of healing power, there is frequent discussion about the importance of a community's self-reliance, autonomy, ability to articulate its own needs, and be self-sufficient (CounterPower, 2020; Dixon, 2015; INCITE!, 2007; Spade, 2020). This idea can become conceptually complicated when coupled with the of "responsibilization," where an impacted, under-resourced, under-served community is in the position of being tasked with its own healing with extremely limited resources. The difference here is that in abolitionist work—such as the work of organizations like CARA—the community is the one assuming this task for itself, because those organizing with and within it have roots in those communities, and work to center and elevate the voices and leadership of the individuals and groups they work with, which is precisely what allows a community to be self-determining, to articulate its own needs rather than having those needs decided by some external power, and services hoisted upon it that are not of its own choosing. When community members are empowered to have a voice, they are able to set the terms and make demands for support—state and otherwise—that truly reflect their needs, priorities, and values. This is easier to accomplish when the boundaries between organizations that are aiding and mobilizing communities, and those communities themselves, are fluid, and permeable. This is an idea of what is meant by 'community' that has been prevalent in abolitionist conversations and work for many years. As Knopp et al. explained in their abolitionist handbook in 1976:

The empowerment models we advocate in this handbook are not to be confused with 'community corrections' referred to by systems people. As abolitionists we essentially identify as community alternatives, those programs created by affected people: ex-prisoners, community workers, drug addicts, alcoholics, rape victims, street crime victims and others. These are programs and alternatives that evolve directly from experience and need and are controlled by participants (p. 167).

This perspective and set of values surrounding 'community' and 'services' that we also see reflected in the abolitionist reentry organizations discussed above, where there is little or no separation between the individuals who are engaged in the healing work, and those who benefit from it.

The goal of these approaches, and of a conception of "community" as most abolitionists refer to it, is a "caring community" (Knopp et al, 1976), or a "beloved community" as Martin Luther King Jr. termed it (Inwood, 2009), "[w]here power and equality of all social primary goods—liberty, opportunity, income and wealth and the bases of self-respect—are institutionally structured and distributed to all members of the community and where the spirit of reconciliation prevails" (Knopp et al, pp. 10-11), "one that assures us our basic needs and inwardly binds us in responsibility for each other" (p. 20), "where all lives are interconnected and respected" (Inwood, 2009, p. 493). A notion of abolitionist reentry is ultimately inseparable from such an understanding of community, and its goals also inseparable from the more general abolitionist goals of constructing such communities. Knopp et al. note that such communities have yet to be built, but as the discussions that follow will illustrate, I believe there is ample evidence to demonstrate that such communities already exist, and continue to be built through the kind of abolitionist organizing work that has been described, and which I will provide additional examples of in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 4: Debates and Critiques, Tensions and Challenges

While the examples of abolitionist reentry discussed in the preceding chapter provide

important illustrations of what abolitionist approaches to reentry, and to reform generally, can

look like, and the value of an abolitionist perspective, they also raise a number of other issues

that are important to attend to in the project of describing an abolitionist framework for the

application to reentry, and to criminal punishment system problems more broadly. This chapter

deals with some of the major unresolved questions, tensions, and challenges in abolitionist

thought and work; it discusses some of the central debates among abolitionists, some of the

major critiques of abolitionism, and their implications for an abolitionist approach to reentry and

to reform generally.

Major Debates in Contemporary Abolitionism

Reformist/Carceral vs. Non-reformist/Abolitionist Reforms

The preceding discussion has illuminated the issue of carceral versus abolitionist reforms,

and while the examples of the two kinds of approaches to reentry illustrate the distinction

between them, it remains one of the most significant conversations in abolitionist scholarship and

activism, because in many other instances, the distinction is not always so clear. Here I will

delve further into that discussion as it is carried out in abolitionist work, both academic and non-

academic, and I will provide examples of cases where differentiating between carceral/reformist

and abolitionist/non-reformist reforms is a challenge, and talk about the implications.

As noted in the second footnote, the terms "reformist reform" and "non-reformist reform"

originate with French sociologist André Gorz (1967), though sometimes these categories are

given different names and have slight variances. Mathiesen's (1974) typology describes "positive" reforms as changes that help make the current system more effective, strengthening it, and "negative" reforms as changes that eliminate parts of the system, upon which it depends, ultimately rendering it weaker. McDowell and Fernandez's (2018) distinction is about efforts that work to dismantle the racial capitalist order, restructure social relations, and build new institutions—what they term "radical abolition"—versus "liberal abolitionist" tendencies that aim to make changes through compromise and reconciliation, leaving the system intact.[14]

In essence, reformist or carceral reforms seek to make palliative improvements to, and within, the current system, while non-reformist or abolitionist reforms have as their end goal the eventual dismantling of that system, and are understood to be individual elements or incremental steps in a larger strategy of structural transformation and building anew. Carceral reforms, as Ben-Moshe describes them, "are situated in the discursive formation of the system as it is, so that any changes are made within or against this existing framework" (Ben-Moshe, 2013, p. 87). "[L]iberal-to-progressive reformism" Rodriguez says, "attempts to protect and sustain the institutional and cultural-political coherence of an existing system by adjusting and/or refurbishing it" (2019, p. 1577). The distinction comes down to whether a specific change will serve to strengthen the system or take away from it (Ben-Moshe, 2013; Knopp etal, 1976), whether it will make abolition more difficult, or facilitate steps toward it (Mathiesen, 1974). The majority of abolitionist work takes this form, by working to dismantle the existing system through 'death by a thousand cuts,' and building up generative alternatives based on abolitionist values (Ben-Moshe, 2013; Knopp et al., 1976). Butts and Akbar (2017) provide the following

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[14] I would argue that calling the "liberal abolitionist" approach "abolitionist" at all is a misnomer.

description of what I am calling here abolitionist reforms—what they call transformative

reforms—that touches on the issues laid out thus far:

> [T]ransformative demands question the legitimacy of the systems that we operate under. They lay out a clear vision of a different type of society, where power relationships, privilege and ownership are reallocated, and then pursue reforms that, even if small, move us closer to that vision. Transformative demands are not only often different in substance but also in process. They create space for directly impacted communities to make decisions. They seek to shrink the reach, budgets, and footprints of punitive state systems. Instead they expand the ability of communities to self diagnose and collectively self-govern in democratic ways. They take the problem holistically and consider the impact of any give [sic] reform on all aspects of the lived experience and material conditions of directly affected communities. Transformative reforms seek to fundamentally alter the nature of institutions as well as to shift resources from punitive institutions into programs and efforts that provide health, food, shelter, and education (p. 5).

Examples of Reformist Reforms. In addition to the example that is one of the major foci

of this dissertation, namely, reformist reentry and rehabilitation reforms, other examples of

carceral reforms include projects to replace old, dilapidated prisons with new, more "humane"

structures, the addition of mental health wards to currently existing prisons and jails, or the

construction of entire new prison and jail facilities supposedly dedicated to addressing mental

health, special "gender responsive" facilities intended to accommodate the needs of women and

mothers, and the provision of additional funds for explicitly punitive institutions to do these

kinds of things—what have been termed instances of "carceral humanism" (Critical Resistance,

2021; Heiner and Tyson, 2017; Kilgore, 2014). Another is electronic monitoring. Touted as a

progressive and preferable alternative to incarceration, one that allows people to serve their time

at home with their families, electronic monitoring extends the reach and control of surveillance

and the carceral state literally into homes and family lives, effectively transforming homes into

carceral institutions (Beckett and Murakawa, 2012; Critical Resistance, 2021; Lacambra, 2018;

Miller, 2014; Shaylor and Chandler, 2011).

Examples of Non-Reformist Reforms. In addition to the examples of abolitionist reforms described in the case study above, abolitionists describe a number of other kinds of non-reformist reforms. Efforts at decarceration, shutting down existing carceral facilities without replacing them, rejecting government spending on carceral facilities construction, expansion, or renovation—especially when those funds are re-routed directly into impacted communities—efforts to reduce police contact, and grassroots community-based services and infrastructures, are all examples of abolitionist reforms (Ben-Moshe, 2013; Brown and Schept, 2017; Butts and Akbar, 2017; Critical Resistance, 2021; Carrier and Piché, 2015; Knopp et al., 1976; Russel and Carlton, 2013; Sudbury, 2009). Transformative justice programs are a specific example of such services, particularly those that are created and run by members of the community, and are materially and ideologically separate from the current criminal system. In other words, they operate entirely disconnected from the current criminal system, share none of its resources, financial or otherwise,[15] and operate according to an ideology, or philosophy of justice that is neither retributive, nor punitive; they are based in anti-capitalist, emancipatory ideology and values, and operate under an abolitionist paradigm of justice.[16] Youth Justice Coalition based in Los Angeles, California, Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective and Generation Five in the San Francisco Bay Area, Community Alternatives To (CAT) 911 in several Southern California neithborhoods, the Safe Outside the System program through the Audre Lorde Project, in Brooklyn, New York, are several examples of such programs. Expungement clinics can also be considered instances of non-reformist reforms. A number of grassroots organizations, and even nonprofits many of them run or staffed by formerly incarcerated people, offer such services

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[15] Schept (2015) talks about the importance of "detach[ing] alternative processes from the formal criminal justice system" (p. 236).
[16] Abolitionist conceptions of justice are discussed in Chapter 5.

freely to anyone who might need them. However, the subject of nonprofits can be sticky territory

for discussions of abolitionism. The discussion of nonprofits raises issues about funding,

donations, philanthropists, and how ties to money that comes from power can poison some of the

seemingly well-intentioned efforts of these initiatives from the start. A number of abolitionist

sources argue further that nonprofits and foundations operate to maintain the status quo by

sustaining an economic structure that furthers capitalism and suppresses mass movements and

radical change (INCITE!; Robinson, 2021). The line of argument that INCITE! advances for this

is similar to the critique of carceral reentry reforms presented here, namely that the service

provision of many nonprofits directs itself to disadvantaged individuals, rather than working to

address system issues, viewing the populations they serve as "clients in need of services" (p. 11),

rather than people who are capable of organizing on their own behalf.[17] In addition, because of

the way nonprofits are forced to operate under capitalist structure, their focus is primarily on

securing funding, rather than the work of organizing mass movements that is required for

fundamental social change.

Problematizing the Distinction. The distinction between carceral and abolitionist

reforms can also sometimes be subtler, and understanding this difference can require "some

radical shifts in our perceptions" (Knopp, p. 7). Gilmore, for instance, has stated that the

difference between abolition and reform is simply a matter of purpose, rather than means

(Gilmore, 2012). Herzing (2016) articulates the issue slightly differently:

> You can make a change that entrenches the system, improves its ability to function,
> increases its legitimacy, so: a non-abolitionist goal. Or, you can take an incremental step
> that steals some of the PIC's power, makes it more difficult to function in the future, or

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[17] This relates to issues of "the community" and the barriers that often separate members of the community from service providers who come into those communities to offer them aid and support, discussed in Chapter 3.

decreases its legitimacy in the eyes of the people. I think the false distinction between reform and abolition assumes that there is some kind of pure vision that doesn't require strategy or incremental moves.

This distinction is not black and white, and not always clear in every case. There are institutional affiliations, relationships, and unknowns that muddy the waters, making it not so evident what kind of actions, changes, organizations, policies, and events to identify as abolitionist/non-reformist, or carceral/reformist. This translates directly to the practical question of which of these to support and which to oppose as abolitionists, something I will address more in-depth below. I will describe two examples of such instances where the distinction between reformist/non-abolitionist and non-reformist/abolitionist becomes complicated.

There is a California organization called the Orange County Reentry Partnership (OCREP)—a hub of public, community, non-profit, and other agencies local to Orange County, CA, who share the mission of providing assistance to people recently released from jail or prison; OCREP provides an important support network for recently incarcerated Orange County residents, and as part of this work, they host a yearly re-entry resource fair for formerly incarcerated people and their families, providing access to community service providers, employers, educational, and other opportunities to assist reintegration. The author attended the first meeting to plan the fourth annual re-entry resource fair, with the intention of volunteering to assist in organizing the event, and was surprised to find two representatives from Geo Group— the second largest for-profit prison and detention-center operator in the country, previously the subject of several civil rights lawsuits for barbaric conditions of confinement—sitting at the table of volunteer-planners. As the meeting progressed it became clear that Geo Group was going to be a substantial sponsor for this event. While this changed my original plan to volunteer to help organize the event, I did participate in the resource fair in a different capacity, tabling as a

representative from the University of California, Irvine chapter of the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI), a University of California student organization comprised of formerly incarcerated and non-formerly incarcerated students working to build and sustain a prison-to-school pipeline, and support formerly incarcerated current and prospective UC students.

Geo Group's participation in the OCREP Re-entry resource fair illustrates a trend among private carceral corporations' attempts to keep with the tide of reform emphases on reentry (Isaacs, 2014). They have also expanded their services to offer reentry resource provision; they now offer residential programs across the country that provide temporary housing, monitoring, and transitional services through their Reentry Resource division (Geo Reentry Services, n.d.). However, Geo Group is as far from an abolitionist organization as one can get. Underground Scholars, on the other hand, would by many abolitionist's standards, be classified as an abolitionist group: it is comprised primarily of formerly incarcerated individuals and allies—many of whom consider themselves to be abolitionists—it operates from a restorative/transformative, non-carceral philosophy, and it works to create opportunities for advancement for formerly incarcerated people, with no direct ties with the formal criminal punishment system.[18]

What is less clear is whether through its direct collaboration with Geo Group, OCREP has become an explicitly non-abolitionist organization as well. A particularly purist abolitionist might also argue that by extension, Underground Scholars UCI's affiliation with OCREP, puts its status as an abolitionist organization into question. Does this mean that every single organization that tabled at the resource fair, or collaborates in any way with OCREP, is reformist? Such is the kind of question that abolitionist work and theorizing generate. Combine

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[18] There is room to argue here that to the extent that any school in the University of California system has any ties to the carceral state, USI does as well.

this with the fact that in abolitionist work on the ground, even within relatively organized and goal-specific organizations such as Initiate Justice and Dignity and Power Now, individuals within these groups have differing ideas about what abolition means to them, with differing implications and value commitments—and the situation reveals itself to be even more complex.

Another example the author has come across in personal experience being involved in local social justice efforts, pertains to California Senate Bill 665 and the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA).[19] MHSA, an initiative that was voted on and enacted in 2004, funds a system of county mental health plans, services, and programs, but it prohibits the use of MHSA funds for mental health services for people in prisons or jails, or on probation or parole. SB 665, introduced in 2019, would have, with some limitations, authorized funds from the MHSA to pay for services to people incarcerated in California jails, or on mandatory supervision. To most people looking to create positive change to the criminal punishment system, this would appear on its surface to be an obvious move to support. However, from an abolitionist perspective, this ultimately constitutes further investment in the expansion of the carceral system (Ben-Moshe, 2013). It is well established in the research as well as among informed members of the public that jails in California, particularly post-AB 109,[20] have become de facto mental health institutions, housing more people with mental illnesses than mental health facilities do (Al-Rousan, Rubenstein, Sieleni, Deol, and Wallace, 2017; Torrey, Kennard, Eslinger, Lamb, Pavle, 2010). This initiative is not a move toward doing away with jails as de facto mental health

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[19] The bill was eventually defeated as the result of great amounts of organizing work on the part of California social justice and advocacy organizations.

[20] AB 109, or "Public Safety Realignment" is a California bill that was passed in 2011 to reduce overcrowding in California prisons, in response to the *Brown v. Plata* supreme court case which ruled the conditions in California prison to be in violation of the US Constitution's right against cruel and unusual punishment, and the corresponding federal mandate to alleviate overcrowding. AB 109 transfers the custody and authority of individuals convicted of "low-level offenses"—"non-serious, non-sexual, and non-violent" from state facilities and custody (prisons and parole) to county facilities and custody (jails, and probation) (AB 109, 2011; Lynch, 2013).

institutions, but a move to strengthen it. It is also part of a larger move to "respond" to (read: co-opt) this critique of jails as de facto mental health institutions by expanding jails, and constructing new specialty "mental health" carceral facilities, which, again, ultimately works to expand and strengthen the carceral state. Local social justice organizations, such as the ACLU and Transforming Justice Orange County, were for a time undecided as to whether to mobilize to support or oppose this bill. While the stance for many has since changed to one of explicit opposition, the initial ambivalence of these organizations helps to illustrate further how choosing which course of action in such situations best operationalizes one's political-moral stance, is sometimes unclear.

One of the reasons for belaboring this distinction between reformist/carceral and nonreformist/abolitionist reforms is practical: how are abolitionists to decide which proposed reforms to support and which to oppose, when the status of those changes as reformist or abolitionist is unclear? This is a question I have heard come up again and again in discussions about this subject, particularly at conferences and other events that bring together academics, activists, and practitioners, and among members of organizations engaged in abolitionist work. Some abolitionists adhere to a categorical imperative of withholding support from *any* effort that gives more resources to the prison industrial complex, even if the result in the immediate may be improved life conditions for incarcerated people, while others maintain that efforts to alleviate suffering and mistreatment of people inside are worthwhile abolitionist goals.

Critical Resistance, a national, grassroots, abolitionist organization takes the firm position that there are no conditions under which further investment in carceral institutions constitutes addressing needs, for trans people, women, or anyone, and the organization advocates a blanket rejection of all proposals to create new prison and jail facilities, regardless of their specialized

focus. They argue instead that accommodating and caring for these special groups—women, trans people, people with mental illnesses—should involve investing in community-based services and resources such as domestic abuse clinics, trauma recovery services, housing, food, and healthcare. For Critical Resistance and others who hold this point of view, the problem with these 'carceral humanist' approaches, is that when it comes down to it, "[d]emands for…gender-responsible treatment…have given rise to the same outcome: demands and plans for building more prisons" (Heiner and Tyson, 2017, p. 9). Schept (2015) articulates this position as well:

> Keeping people out of jail or prison, rather than reconfiguring jail and prison to be slightly more comfortable or humane, should be a central goal of community organizing to combat poverty, racism, violence, addiction, or crime (p. 236).

The problem that this may simply shift or expand the locus of carceral control from prisons and jails to community facilities and institutions, creating more of the same under different names, has been raised among scholars and activists engaged in this discussion. Scholars use the term "the shadow carceral state" (Beckett and Murakawa, 2012; Friedman, 2020; Selman, Myers, and Goddard, 2019) to describe the expansion of carceral control into communities, even through well-intentioned "alternatives," such as electronic monitoring. However, there is a palpable difference between community-developed, grassroots, community-run programs, and those that are instituted by the state, and even non-profit services whose funding links them to sources of power that operate to bolster status quo economic and social relations. As long as community-based programs can maintain themselves being run by members of the community, and can sustain a commitment to grassroots funding, or other forms of support that do not corrupt their aims, practices, and values, they can maintain conceptual and practical

independence from those service providers and programs that do simply become new institutions of social control.[21]

Long-Term Abolitionist Goals vs Immediate Needs. A major part of the challenge of grappling with how to differentiate between abolitionist and carceral reforms is about the tension in abolitionist work, between long-term abolitionist goals of eliminating the carceral state, and another essential component of abolitionist work, namely, supporting the immediate needs of those harmed by the prison industrial complex. This tension is visible in many places throughout abolitionist theory and work. For instance, in their Mission Statement, Critical Resistance notes that "[b]ecause we seek to abolish the [PIC], we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope" (Agid, Berndt, Herzing, and Wohlfeiler, n.d.). One of the standards for their work, and for calling it abolitionist, includes not extending the life of the PIC, by making it "less possible for the PIC to continue" (ibid.), and not extending its scope by either not supporting, or actively working against "solutions" that "validate any part of the PIC" (ibid.) by facilitating pipelines into prison, caging people, or constructing "mental health" jails. At the same time, another guideline they include is whether the work facilitates future challenges to the PIC, or contributes to something that will have to be dismantled later. Under this umbrella is the question, "[d]oes it offer immediate support to people harmed by the PIC?" (ibid.). Some would argue that working to *improve* prison conditions contributes to their longevity, and that any such project therefore cannot be considered abolitionist because it works against the long-term goal of eliminating the system. At its strictest, this standard assumes that no efforts can be addressed to immediate needs while at the same time remaining committed to a long-term goal of abolition, that an abolitionist

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[21] The discussion in Chapter 2 of the notion of "community," and the discussion of criteria for differentiating abolitionist from carceral reforms, and of abolitionist principles values in this chapter, below, touch on this issue.

reform is a contradiction in terms (KatherineKellyAbraham, 2018). However, the perspective that KatherineKellyAbraham put forward, discussed in Chapter 2, that all state institutions and mechanisms need to be dismantled *before* pursuing alternative social systems, is in the minority among abolitionists, both academic and activist.

An article reporting on the project to close Rikers in New York City, and the disagreements between the abolitionist organization No New Jails NYC and others affiliated with the #CLOSErikers campaign (Coltin, 2019), illustrates this tension quite well. No New Jails has been successfully calling for the closure of Rikers, but also for no new jails to be constructed in its place. Nabil Hassein, an organizer for the group, remarked, "We're a prison abolitionist group…we believe that human beings do not belong in cages…Any jail closure is a positive step toward abolition, and any jail being built is a step away from that" (ibid.). No New Jails' specific plan involves those incarcerated in the existing jails remaining where they are as long as they have to be jailed, not transferred to any new facilities that might be built. But other supporters of the #CLOSErikers campaign note that these jails, which have received many of the same criticisms as Rikers, are outdated and unsafe, arguing that it is "morally indefensible" (ibid.) to keep people in these inadequate facilities; they disagree with No New Jails' plan of opposing construction of new facilities which these other supporters believe would provide more humane conditions of confinement.

This idea of "help[ing] people to better endure unjust social conditions" (Goddard and Myers, 2017, p. 130), such as conditions of confinement, is often identified with reformist-reform programs. But the urgent and sometimes literally life-or-death needs of those inside the walls need to be addressed; I do not know of any abolitionist who would deny that making sure that people who are locked up are treated as human beings is essential. And some organizations

are able to undertake this work in ways that simultaneously contribute to long-term goals of system dismantling. For instance, the group Fight Toxic Prisons (FTP), which self-identifies as abolitionist, (Fight Toxic Prisons, n.d.), work to amplify the voices of those inside, and select campaigns based on what incarcerated people identify as urgent, and in ways that challenge the prison system, in the immediate and long-term, such as using phone zaps as a resistance strategy when making demands of a prison administration, or getting the Bureau of Prisons office shut down for several days by physically blocking access to the building (Fight Toxic Prisons, 2019). Longer-term efforts include campaigns to stop the construction of new carceral facilities, and resource development and education within impacted communities (ibid.). While FTP's work provides an example of one way that long-term abolitionist goals and meeting the immediate needs of system-impacted people may be able to take place at the same time, there is likely always going to be disagreement among abolitionists as to what "counts" as a purely abolitionist project. This tension is not likely to be resolved in academic discussions, but worked out on the ground, by those engaged in abolitionist work.

Downstream vs. Upstream Abolition. That being said, some conceptual and terminological distinctions may help clarify the issues behind these tensions, and may aid in this on-going process of resolution. I propose a distinction between *downstream* and *upstream* abolition work. The downstream/upstream language derives from a parable often attributed to Saul Alinsky, which goes something like this: a person is walking along a river and notices a body floating downstream; they see a nearby fisherperson dive into the water, drag the person out, and save them. Another body floats by, and the fisherperson again dives in and saves the drowning person. When yet another drowning person appears, this time the fisherperson runs

along the riverbank upstream. The observer asks the fisherperson what they are doing, why they are not trying to rescue this person. "This time," the fisherperson says, "I'm going upstream to find out who is pushing these folks into the water". This parable has been used often in discussions about social justice efforts, to highlight the difference between addressing the symptoms of social problems, and addressing the root causes. But I have heard the issue arise in many conversations among abolitionists, that while it is essential to deal with root causes (which for abolitionists, means eliminating the PIC, and the conditions of its existence), in the meantime, people continue to suffer sometimes lethal violence brought upon them by the carceral state in ways that require immediate attention. Incarcerated people die in custody because of the failures of carceral administrations to meet basic needs such as medical attention for what sometimes begin as easily addressable health issues and have ended in death (Carson and Cowhig, 2020; Jones, 2020; Pho, 2019); incarcerated people continue to be subject to cruel injustices and to endure extremely adverse conditions.

These are issues that it is possible to address right now, if only to provide short-term relief that improves life conditions, and these kinds of approaches do not need to be seen as incompatible with abolitionist ones if undertaken in the right way (Ben-Moshe, 2013; Knopp et al, 1976), which is why it may be helpful to have terminology with which to identify *downstream abolition* work—work that addresses urgent needs, undertaken in such a way that does not validate, strengthen, or contribute to expanding the life or scope of the PIC, while maintaining a commitment to an abolitionist vision and guided by abolitionist principles—and *upstream abolition* work—which focuses on longer-term goals that bring us closer to the realization of a society without a carceral state, including emancipatory, generative work that builds alternatives, strengthens, and empowers communities and impacted people. A number of abolitionists have

made the argument that addressing immediate or shorter-term issues is not irreconcilable with the commitment to an abolitionist vision of the future (ibid.).

Criteria for Distinguishing Between Reformist/Non-Reformist Reforms. These discussions illustrate a need for a set of criteria for talking about, and examining approaches, organizations, and programs that purport to address punishment system issues, a tool that abolitionist activists and scholars can use to guide thinking about what makes something "abolitionist". While I will not endeavor to completely refine such a tool within the scope of this dissertation, a beginning can be made based on the elements above that distinguish abolitionist reentry from carceral reentry, in combination with some of the criteria already put forward by organizations and individuals such as Critical Resistance and Mariame Kaba, as well as the work of abolitionist scholars who have made suggestions in this area. Drawing on this work, and the analysis conducted here thus far, I propose the following guidelines for calling a reform abolitionist:

1. *They explicitly state their mission as being abolitionist.* This condition should be seen as neither necessary, nor sufficient. In other words, some groups may be engaged in abolitionist work without identifying as such. And while it is unlikely an organization would call themselves abolitionist if they are not,[22] this may be too lax a criterion on its own. There should be room to evaluate organizations and initiatives according to their

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[22] There are many diverse understandings of abolition. As noted in footnote 2, abolitionist perspectives especially as advanced by non-black people are frequently the subject of justified critique from the perspective of black and African descended people and the black radical tradition, for their failure to adequately credit and acknowledge the labor and bloodshed of black and African descended people. Thus, it is entirely possible for an organization—say, an all or majority white organization—to call themselves abolitionist, undertake work they consider to be abolitionist, but rightfully be the subject of such a critique. This is one reason why self-identification as abolitionist is an important indication of a group's abolitionist aims, but cannot be a sufficient condition. As a white person of privilege, my perspective on abolition will be inevitably limited, and I acknowledge this as I put forward these criteria, which, as a result, will itself also be limited.

practices, values, and impacts, rather than simply what they say they are doing. Hence the remaining following criteria.

2. *They are based upon an ideology or value base that challenges punitive/carceral ideology* (Ben-Moshe, 2013; Burch, 2017)*, and a systemic analysis of all forms of oppression* (CounterPower, 2020b.). Abolitionist approaches to reentry or any other social problem proceed from, and with, an analysis of the conditions that have produced the problems these approaches have been developed to address. Such a critical, systemic analysis of oppression must attend to the multiple and intersecting lines of oppression based on (but not limited to) race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation. Abolitionist approaches also proceed from, and are guided by certain values. Some of the most common values and principles understood by most abolitionists as abolitionist are transformative justice, mutual aid, community accountability, harm reduction, community wellness, and elevating/centering the voices and experience of impacted people (e.g. Cullors, 2018; No New Jails, n.d.; Spade, 2020).

3. *How 'success' is defined: they look beyond recidivism reduction, understanding that is an inadequate measure of 'success' at the program or individual level, and instead allow impacted people to define their own terms of success, and work to support their efforts to live fulfilling, self-determined lives.*

4. *Opposition, either in philosophy or practice, to the construction of new or "improved" carceral facilities.*

5. *They are not punitive; they do not respond to harms by punishing, but by addressing needs* (Rice and Smith, 2019).

6. *They are run by, or incorporate direct input from, incarcerated, formerly incarcerated and/or system-impacted people; they do not rely solely on non-system-impacted "professionals" or "experts".* This should be thought of as a necessary but insufficient condition; simply incorporating the experience or even leadership of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people does not, by itself, make something abolitionist.

7. *Unlike traditional interventions, they do not put all the responsibility on the individuals to change/do the work.*

8. *They are decarcerative: they work to weaken and reduce the size and power of the PIC* (Agid et al., n.d.; Karaktsanis, 2019; Schept, 2015)*, including but not limited to reducing or removing funding to the carceral state* (Critical Resistance, n.d.b). *They do not expand, reconfigure, or increase the power of the carceral state in any way.*

9. *They are in no way supported by, or otherwise tied to, funding sources involving the carceral state.*

10. *They contribute to building power that fundamentally challenges the existing power structure* (Karakatsanis, 2019) *and prefigure relations of an emancipated and emancipatory society, by uplifting and empowering communities, strengthening community capacity to address harm and create accountability* (Critical Resistance, 2021)*, and working toward forms of societal organization that are based on justice, equity, and sustainability* (CounterPower, n.d.).

What it means to undertake this work "in the right way," means with a commitment to abolitionist values and principles. This list can serve not only as a set of criteria, but as an itemization of several central abolitionist principles: a) adopting an explicitly non-punitive approach and commitment to non-punitive ideology, b) grounding assessment of current systems

and initiatives and the work to create new ones, in a systemic analysis of oppression, white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, settler-colonialism, and ableism, c) evaluating goals and impacts in terms of how well they work to bring about self-determination, autonomy, liberty, well-being, and power in impacted individuals and communities, d) centering the experiences, expertise, authority, and leadership of those individuals and communities, e) contributing always to decarceration, opposing the transfer of resources into mechanisms of carceral control such as prisons, jails, or police, and f) supporting the transfer of resources into impacted communities.

Co-opting & absorption

A related, important part of the abolitionist conversation is about whether it is possible to work toward abolition using incremental reforms without those efforts being co-opted and absorbed by the system, because the system has a tremendous ability to adapt to changes intended to weaken it, demonstrating a pattern of ultimately using those reforms to strengthen and perpetuate itself (e.g. Kaba, 2021; Knopp et al, 1976; McLeod, 2012; Rodriguez, 2019; Saleh-Hanna, 2017). The system can co-opt practices, but it can also co-opt ideas, such as abolitionist critiques.

Restorative justice is one oft-discussed example, and it illustrates system-co-optation of an alternative approach to resolution of "crime". With roots in indigenous peacemaking practices, restorative justice can, in many contexts, be thought of as an abolitionist endeavor, as it can be used to resolve issues that might otherwise enter into the criminal system, it can do this independently of the system, and operates according to an ideology of forgiveness rather than retribution, of repair rather than punishment, addresses harms rather than "crimes". Abolitionists have described restorative justice as means by which we might divest from the state, a way to

demonstrate that "accountability and community integrity can be achieved more effectively and with greater humanity without the state" (Kletsan, 2018, p. 198). It has also been talked about as a way to undermine and challenge retributive narratives of "justice" (Willet and Thompson, 2015) However, as many scholars and activists have pointed out, restorative justice has in other contexts been incorporated directly into the criminal punishment system and institutionalized within it, as in restorative justice courts. One reason this is problematic is that as soon as participation in restorative justice processes become coerced or required, it loses its emancipatory power:

> Restorative justice cultivates the power of individuals and strengthens the social connections between them…its practitioners assert their own humanity and recognize the humanity of someone they have harmed or one who has harmed them. Incarcerated people have their guilt reified every day by their material conditions and the narrative that surrounds those conditions. Restorative justice is a mode by which incarcerated and criminalized people can salvage their self-respect from a system that is consistently robbing them of it (Kletsan, p. 199).

But this is contingent, Kletsan argues, upon participation being voluntary. When a practice like restorative justice, which is based in values of healing, repair, accountability, forgiveness, and community, is made into part of the carceral machinery, which is based on entirely opposite values—punishment, retribution, and violence—this situates restorative justice within an institutional context that conflicts with its fundamental philosophy. It is made compulsory, it is delivered from a punitive setting, and it loses its transformative power (Rice and Smith, 2019).

Others have pointed out that simply practicing restorative justice in Western, white supremacist, settler societies and institutions is an inherent contradiction itself (Valandra and Hokšíla, 2020), because restorative justice is rooted in values of restoration, repair, and healing that cannot be properly sustained in a colonial context. Thus, co-optation of this indigenous

practice by white settlers, or its use in a white-settler framework, is inherently problematic, and does violence to the Indigenous cultures it comes from (Tauri, 2018). As Valandra and Hokšíla point out, "[r]ather than changing systems, RJ processes are called on to 'patch up' the harms that racist and colonizing structures and institutions cause routinely" (p. 2).

The carceral system does not only co-opt practices; it also co-opts critiques. The earlier discussed subject of mental health provision in carceral facilities provides an example of this. As explained above, there has been a relatively recent wave of public awareness about the aforementioned fact that jails have become de facto mental health institutions. This point was originally intended as a *critique* of the system, as a reason why divestment from carceral institutions and investment in community mental health are so important. As this idea began to make its way into the mainstream, began to make sense to many people, politicians and carceral administrators transformed this critique into an argument for *expanding* and further investment in carceral institutions. Ben-Moshe and others have pointed out that "[s]ome factors leading to the growth of the prison industry were the direct result of attempts to reform the system" (Ben-Moshe, 2013, p. 87)—this issue of addressing mental health for those incarcerated in jails is a prime example.

Implications for Abolitionist Reentry

This discussion highlights how essential it is for abolitionist programs to maintain their integrity by adhering to abolitionist principles, practices, and values. To avoid being absorbed into or co-opted by the current carceral system, abolition reentry initiatives must maintain their commitment to critical perspectives of carceral ideology and carceral systems, a systemic analysis of oppression, and a challenge to forces of patriarchy, white supremacy,

heteronormativity, settler-colonialism, ableism, etc. They must work in ways that channel funding and resources out of the carceral state, into impacted communities and contribute to building strength and autonomy in those communities. Perhaps most challenging, they must commit to operating without funding ties to the carceral state. This is perhaps a particularly difficult challenge for reentry, given the surge of government and foundation funding made available for reentry work over the past decade or so. Burch's (2017) ethnographic case study of Susan Burton's A New Way of Life program as an alternative approach to reentry contains an illustrative example of this.

Burch presents Burton's program as one that distinguishes itself from carceral reentry initiatives, and many of the differences Burch observes of A New Way of Life respond directly to the critiques of traditional reentry discussed here. Its holistic approach—one that focuses not merely on service provision, but on "confront[ing] the structures and policies that limit life options before and after imprisonment" (p. 362), Burch argues, speaks to the problem of mainstream programs' tendencies to "situate[e] pathology and accountability entirely within the individual 'offender'" (p. 358). A New Way of Life also distinguishes itself by its grounding in a critical, socioeconomic, race- and gender-based perspective of the reasons why people end up in prison in the first place, and through its imperative of centering the experiences and voices of imprisoned people. Burch recounts Burton's experience entering into a contract with the Department of Probation, under California's Realignment Act of 2011, how this compromised A New Way of Life's values and ultimately the work. Requirements of the contract, such as detailed reporting on residents' daily activities and rule enforcement, introduced a surveillance and supervisory approach, opposed to the attitude of support and individual agency that Burton sought to cultivate for her program, and occluded her goal of not creating a reentry organization

that simply reproduced the punitive practices of prisons. The requirements of the contract undermined these generative values and approaches, and as a result, Burton believed, the residents' abilities to succeed. So, the program explicitly separated itself from the carceral system, and committed itself to running on funding sources independent of the state. Burch notes that "an ideal of absolute autonomy from the criminal punishment system isn't easy to maintain…nonrestrictive funding sources are difficult to come by" (p. 367), and this presents a practical challenge for abolitionist approaches to reentry. Thus, a commitment to grassroots funding is essential to avoid co-optation and absorption.

Critiques, Tensions, and Challenges in Abolitionist Reentry

As is illustrated in the discussions above, abolition is not a panacea. In addition to the yet unresolved debates just described, there are tensions and challenges within abolitionism, and an abolitionist approach to reentry. These issues tend to arise at the intersections between theory and praxis, where the implications of abolitionist value commitments are put to the test. The first two I discuss here, the dangerous few, and public misperception of abolition, can be thought of as critiques and tensions that come from an external perspective—so, from the point of view of non-abolitionists. The issues of the role of harmful dominant culture, harm and violence within abolitionist communities, what I am calling "the justice contradiction," and the implications of centering the leadership of impacted people, are tensions that arise primarily within and among abolitionists. The purpose of these discussions will be to simply raise the issues, while the remaining portion of this dissertation, which is dedicated to laying out a theoretical framework of abolition, will discuss resolutions and work through them.

Critiques and Tension from a Lay Perspective

The Dangerous Few

When I explain to people who are not familiar with abolition that I am an abolitionist, the first question that never fails to arise is "What do we do with the dangerous people?", "What do we do with the rapists and the murderers?". This is an issue that has come to be known in the literature as "the dangerous few"—that supposed segment of the population thought to be incorrigible, and unamenable to alternatives to incarceration, who constitute too great a threat to society to not be restrained or excised in some way. Abolitionists have mixed views on this. Saleh-Hanna acknowledges that "penal abolition needs to work harder at refining its stance…and in figuring out what can be done in response to this matter" (2000, p. 62). Ben-Moshe says "some advocate for… practices in which no one will be restrained or segregated, while others believe there will always be a small percentage of those whose behavior is so unacceptable or harmful that they will need to be exiled or restrained" (Ben-Moshe, 2013, p. 91). Knopp et al. (1976) note that

> there is little disagreement that for those very few people who exhibit continual violent and aggressive behavior in society, temporary restraint is not only indicated but demanded (p. 135).

The above quote comes from *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists*, a text considered almost canonical in some abolitionist circles, and yet, we see the authors advocating for the idea that there will always be certain types of people who must be locked away. This view is not limited to these authors alone (Carrier and Piché, 2015); some have argued that "the deprivation

of liberty might be unavoidable" (de Haan, 1992, quoted in Carrier and Piché, 2015, p. 122), it just needs to be done in a "humane" way (ibid).

One problem with Knopp et al.'s suggestion, however—as with any suggested answer to this problem that delineates certain conditions of restraint or segregation, indicating that such practices would be acceptable but only if they are carried out in a humane manner, for as short a duration as possible, and according to "due process safeguards"—is that, as the present criminal punishment system makes clear, even where special conditions are pre-specified, required, mandated by law, there is no guarantee that they will be adhered to, regardless of who is in control of this process. Furthermore, it is a slippery slope to allow for the practice of segregating a small number of individuals meeting certain criteria, as it is difficult to ensure that the boundaries of that category won't be bent or widened to be made more inclusive, as we have also seen happen in the current system.

The idea that there will always be some people who need to be locked up comes in part from the fear that mainstream media engineers in public consciousness. As Kaba and Hayes (2018) put it, "The carceral system has always used sensationalized cases and the specter of unthinkable harm to create new mechanisms of disposability". The inability, or lack of will, to imagine a world in which prisons are necessary for no one, is part of a knee-jerk reaction that results from the power of carceral occupation in public and psychological space, that constrains most people's ability to think outside of it or to imagine anything different.

This raises several issues for abolitionist reentry. If there are truly some individuals for whom community-based alternative approaches to reconciling harm will not work, at what point do abolitionist reentry organizations say they cannot handle these individuals, and to whom do they say it? Because a feature of abolitionist reentry is its total independence from the

punishment system, the implication would be that some other kind of alternative may have to be developed, perhaps one that takes certain people out of the community, but adheres to abolitionist principles as best it can. For instance, it would operate from a place of understanding the social context of these individuals' behavior. It would ask "What are the surrounding conditions that help produce these issues, and how do we address *those*?" and "What circumstances provide the best opportunities for this individual to heal?". These goals are exemplified in passages such as the following, from *Abolition Journal's* "Abolition Statement":

> we recognize that when harm occurs in a community it may be necessary to separate those whose immediate physical actions have resulted in harm to another. Social separation has its place. However, successful social separation should be as brief as possible and should result in the restoration of the individual to his or her [sic] community and the restoration of victims and their families (Alexander, 2015).

Lancaster (2017) points out the contention inherent in this perspective, namely, what is to stop this approach from sliding into something more punitive? If people are separated against their will, how is this different from a form of incarceration? As Lancaster puts it, this is merely a "reinvent[ion of] the minimalist rehabilitative prison" (2017). Perhaps the exercise of imagining how one would apply other abolitionist principles can be of use here. If the devising and implementing of a system for handling such people is done from the perspective of a critical analysis of, and challenge to, oppressive systems, if the goal is understood to be "how can we best transform structural circumstances to avoid such a situation in the future, and how can we work to ensure the health, wellbeing, and self-determination of the individual(s) involved?", if these circumstances are approached via an assessment of what unmet needs have created this situation of conflict, if they contribute to the empowerment of the most impacted communities, and if decisions about how to handle such individuals are made by people who are the most

impacted, and have been through the punishment system—perhaps then, the resulting resolution could avoid reproducing punitive and carceral logics. As de Haan argues, "even in such cases, it would be preferable to look for fairer and more humane options based on solidarity, neighborly relations and a communitarian spirit, rather than continuing to resort to solutions advanced by bureaucrats, professionals, and a centralizing State" (de Haan, 1992, quoted in Carrier and Piché, 2015). However, when we try to apply other abolitionist principles, it gets tricky. For instance, if a goal of this approach is to avoid having professionals and experts prescribe treatment, is it still these difficult individuals who design and lead their own care? Furthermore, what does such a resolution that abides by these principles actually look like in practice?

Many abolitionists argue that the very concept of "the dangerous few" reflects an ignorantly narrow understanding of violence. Kaba, for instance, encourages us to keep in mind that who is considered "dangerous" or "violent" are the products of political decisions (Kaba and Hayes, 2018; Rice and Smith, 2019). She, along with other abolitionists (Calathes, 2017; Carrier and Piché, 2015; Pate, 2008), point out that individuals who cause inordinate amounts of harm by, for instance, dumping toxic waste, or signing off on sending thousands of people to kill others in global wars, are not considered violent or dangerous people in the same way as when we talk about "the dangerous few," despite the fact that these kinds of acts harm many more people than an individual who say, commits a homicide. The abolitionist perspective on this issue aims to "trouble the very notion of 'dangerousness'" (Kaba and Hayes, 2018) and highlights the importance of asking ourselves why some acts of violence are considered differently based on who causes them, and the context within which they occur, which leads to a critique of the power dynamics that produce conditions of violence, and a system that focuses on certain kinds of violence, among certain categories of people—namely "street crimes,"

committed by poor, marginalized populations—at the expense of others—namely institutional, governmental, white collar, and corporate crime.

It is important to point out here that while this line of argument is instrumental in helping to shift public consciousness away from common ways of thinking about crime and violence, and towards the notion that there are tremendous sources of violence that do far more harm than "street crime" that are not given sufficient attention, it often ends up functioning as a deflection tactic, whether those making this argument recognize as much or not. To respond to the question of "What do we do with the dangerous people?" by saying that most attention is on the wrong kind of danger, that we need to look at the acts of massive-scale harm, violence, injustice, and oppression being committed by those in positions of power, is a reorientation to the argument for systemic transformation, but it does not actually answer the question that those posing it are asking. And when this argument is given as the sole response, it sidesteps the question. As Carrier and Piché point out: "A normative discourse problematizing the fact that penal politics are established towards exceptional events is totally uncontroversial [among abolitionists], but does not dispense abolitionist thought of solving the question of the 'dangerous few'" (2015). This is in no way to say that we should not be taking a hard look at the harmful, violent acts of the powerful, but it should be offered as *part* of a response, the second portion of which should provide a thoughtful explanation of what an abolitionist approach to dealing with individual instances of violence looks like, in cases of seemingly intractable violence. The reason why this deflection occurs is because, as Saleh-Hannah points out, abolitionist positions on this issue have not been adequately developed. There are a number of components here that need to be worked through. If we pursue the line of thinking that restraint of some sort is unavoidable, and so it

should be done in a way that is humane, as a last resort, offering opportunities for healing, these conditions need to be defined. I will endeavor to do that in the remainder of this section.

There are indeed some abolitionists who maintain the perspective that every situation of harm and violence results from structural conditions and unmet needs, and that when those needs can be met and those structural conditions addressed, it is theoretically possible to build a world in which the question of the dangerous few is obsolete. Ben-Moshe refers to those who advance this argument as "radical inclusionists" (2013, p. 91). This is based on the idea that any issue that results in a person winding up behind bars, can be resolved by addressing the circumstances that lead them to be in that position in the first place. On the less extreme end, if someone has committed an act of violence in order to obtain money, we eliminate the conditions that make such an act possible by addressing poverty; at the furthest extreme, if someone has raped and murdered a child, we address their mental health issues, and we look at the social conditions in which these acts occur, to think about how to prevent them from arising in the first place by addressing the social conditions that made them possible. This is part of the power of an abolitionist framework—if locking people away is rendered conceptually not an option, we are forced to think of other solutions.

If we call to mind the mountains of research demonstrating that people who cause harm are most often people against whom harm has been perpetrated (Alexander, 2015; Dixon and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Hayes and Kaba, 2018; Kats and Willis, 2016; Robertson and Wallace, 2016; Sered, 2019; Thom, 2020), it becomes easier to understand why the goal should be to intervene in this cycle, and eliminate the conditions that produce 'dangerous' people in the first place. This can make it easier to digest the idea that any case of grievous, individual violence—people love to bring up 'the Charles Mansons' or 'the Ted Bundies' as examples of

individuals for whom the need to be locked up is presumed to be unassailable—*can* be treated as a mental health issue, and resolved with a mental health approach. Some abolitionists remain committed to the notion that alternatives to incarceration are always possible, even in these most extreme cases:

> there are people who do harm, who may not be ready to be in community right at this moment, and we have to find ways to fix the issue, to heal them, to make those who are harmed whole again…So, there might be somebody who has a mental health issue, now I agree if you shoot up a school you have a mental health issue, if you're a child molester you have a mental health issue, there's a way to get secure confinement, there's a way to do treatment without putting someone in this thing we call a prison. We can have a more robust imagination than that (Salima, 2019).

Whether or not one believes it is possible to not rely on isolation or removal in any form to deal with any individual case, no matter how extreme, it is important to admit that such cases are the exception, rather than the rule. And as Mariame Kaba points out, it makes little sense to build an entire system based on the exception (Rice and Smith, 2019).

Another suggestion from the abolitionist literature for addressing the problem of the 'dangerous few' has been to develop a strategy of decarceration and alternatives that begins with the most severe cases—which is the opposite of most decarceration strategies currently taking place in the US. For instance, with California's AB-109, we have seen an approach to decreasing the prison population that begins, more palatably to the public, with addressing "non-violent," "non-serious," "non-sexual" cases. The idea in beginning with the most extreme cases first is 1) if these individuals are addressed at the end, segregation is thought to more likely be the resort, and 2) if approaches are developed first with these individuals in mind, and incarceration can be shown to be unnecessary even in these most severe cases, the conclusion that imprisonment is not necessary can more easily be applied to all other cases. In his swift and massive

decarceration of juvenile institutions in Massachusetts, Miller (1991) adhered to this philosophy, beginning with the most extreme cases, with successful results (Ben-Moshe, 2013; Carrier and Piché, 2015).

So if one practical solution is to begin with the most extreme cases, it may be worthwhile to explore what abolitionist reentry might look like in a case of, for instance, individuals who commit child sexual harm. People who commit child sexual harm are in perhaps one of the most stigmatized categories of crime, or harm, that there is, even among those who are most progressively minded. For this reason, applying the abolitionist and transformative justice notion that those who commit harm are deserving of attention, resources, and support in order to heal, to these kinds of cases, can be difficult to think about. In her discussion of radical inclusionists, Ben-Moshe notes that "[t]he goal is to educate the person not to violate any major social norms but simultaneously challenge social views and attitudes that construct normalcy in particular ways" (p. 91). Therefore, the work of thinking about how an abolitionist approach would handle people who commit this and other extreme kinds of harm is not only a matter of thinking about structures and systems and power dynamics, but of intervening in collective and individual narratives and moral perspectives of such individuals. Some of the ways that abolitionist groups work to affect narratives include public education campaigns, teach-ins, making use of social media platforms, and engaging in the media through writing op-eds, doing interviews on podcasts and news segments, etc.

In *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement,* Haines, Laviña, Lymbertos, Maccani, and Shara (2020), of the organization Generation Five, contribute a chapter that discusses some of the few efforts that exists for addressing child sexual assault while maintaining a commitment to social justice values. They point out that

> [g]iven current punitive interventions, there is very little incentive for any of us to acknowledge sexually abusive behavior to others. It is vital that we create spaces and encouragement for people who have sexually abused children, or who feel they might sexually abuse children in the future, to be able to share and come forward (p. 115).

They also mention the extremely important fact that there is, at present, in the US, no existing systems of support for people with pedophilic urges. Such systems, though rare, do exist, however. Haines et al. describe a program in Berlin, Germany, called "Troubled Desire," established in 2005 that provides anonymous online therapeutic support to anyone with an attraction to children. The mere fact that such a program exists required that someone view people with pedophilic urges not only as amenable to therapeutic aid, but as worthy of such support. However, for this to become a widespread approach requires a massive overhaul in the currently dominant views of people who perpetrate child sexual harm. And given that programs like this might prevent a person with such tendencies from acting on them, or learn to address them if they have already, it highlights the urgency of such a perspective shift, and for these kinds of opportunities to become more widespread. Creating the space for such individuals to ask for and receive help, a space where forgiveness is possible, would constitute some of the first steps in an abolitionist reentry approach to childhood sexual harms.

Thus, understanding such extreme kinds of harms as resulting from unmet needs, and as resolvable if the individuals who commit them are given the right resources—forgiveness, understanding, a chance to heal, space to come forward, psychological help, etc.—may be an appropriate way to respond to them. While this discussion does not cover other instances of "incorrigible" behavior such as extreme violence, it still lends credence to the "radical inclusionists" view that a world in which no one needs to be restrained may be a possibility, if the appropriate resources can be made available. Mathiesen's notion of abolition as "the

unfinished" (1974) is instrumental here: understanding abolition as an unfinished project can help to secure the idea that any formalized strategies proposed for dealing with questions such as 'the dangerous few,' should always be accompanied by the understanding that such proposals are constantly open to revision, in light of experiences from trial and error, heretofore unconsidered lessons from history, or other perspectives.

Public Misperception of Abolition

It is extremely difficult for most people to conceptualize, let alone consider the idea of a world without prisons, precisely because of the extent to which prisons and punishment occupy psychic and social space. It would not be too far of a stretch to say that an abolitionist world is currently inconceivable to most of the general public. As Benjamin notes, "[f]or many people, the idea that we can defy politics as usual and channel human ingenuity toward more cooperative and inclusive forms of social organization is utterly farfetched" (Benjamin, 2016, p. 3).

A tremendous part of the reason for this is not necessarily that people agree with the notion of prisons and punishment as a way of dealing with social ills, or that they *want* a more violent, unsafe, and unjust world—although there likely are some who do—but because the idea of abolition is grossly misunderstood (Shank, 2020). And this is a testament to the strength and power of carceral ideology. Not only are such ideas considered by many to be far-fetched, but

> it can even seem wrong to consider non-carceral responses to violence, because dominant neoliberal logic delineates only one intelligible schema of accountability for violence—that of an individual (non-state) agent—and only one general form of legitimate response: state-centric punishment. Alternative forms of community accountability and redress that break from state-centric systems appear baffling, irresponsible, even monstrous. The choice seems to be confined to either ensnaring an individual with the punitive arms of the state or fomenting complete, unaccountable disorder" (Heiner and Tyson, 2017, p. 3).

Misperception of what abolitionism means is a point that many abolitionist scholars and activists have discussed as well (e.g. Brown and Schept, 2017; Byrd, 2016; McLeod, 2015). Brown and Schept write, "[i]n the popular imagination of Americans, abolition seems an impossible vista of a world free of prisons, one that allows for harm, violence, and impunity to continue" (Brown and Schept, 2017, pp. 451-452). The image that tends to come to mind is one of breaking down prison gates and walls, and "the criminals" flooding out into the streets, sowing destruction, violence, and chaos. If abolition is understood as "an immediate and indiscriminate opening of prison doors—that is, the imminent physical elimination of all structures of incarceration" (McLeod, 2015, p. 1161), or a mere substitution of carceral institutions for something else that serves the same function (Davis, 2003), "rejection of abolition is perhaps warranted" (McLeod, 2015, p. 1161). But this is not what abolitionists envision; it is not what they are working for. In addition to pursuing a gradual project of decarceration and new ways of administering justice according to revised conceptions of what justice means,[23] above all, abolitionists are looking to transform the conditions that enable violence, harm, injustice in the first place (NoNewJails, n.d., p. 46). And in this sense, "[a]bolition…requires a thoughtful visionary reworking of the ways in which we live with harm, violence, and oppression" (Brown and Schept, 2017, p. 453).

If an abolitionist vision were merely about replacing the current punishment system with something comparable, without addressing the root social causes that lead to the need for a punishment system in the first place, the result would not be abolition (Byrd, 2016; Davis, 2003). We cannot be merely thinking of something that will occupy the same "footprint" or serve the same function as the carceral system (Davis, 2003). As Critical Resistance puts in their Abolitionist Toolkit, "if we're imagining that a world without prisons is going to look like the

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[23] A detailed discussion of an abolitionist notion of justice is given below.

world we live in now, we aren't really imagining abolition" (Agid, Berndt, Herzing, and Wohlfeiler, n.d., p.16).

For this reason, abolitionist reentry projects should think of themselves as building up alternatives to state systems of dealing with people who come out of prison, that can eventually render the carceral state obsolete—which is part of why building the power and autonomy of impacted communities is essential. Building up communities and neighborhoods that do not need to rely on state intervention to deal with situations of harm and violence, also contributes to rendering abolition more conceivable, as such communities can provide examples of what it looks like for communities to be self-sustaining, to function well not in spite of the fact that they are operating without state intervention, but because of it.

Tensions Within Abolition Thought and Praxis

Dominant Culture at Work Among Abolitionists

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges to abolitionist thought and work, and one that many of the others discussed here follow from, is the fact that the harmful systems, power dynamics, and cultural patterns that currently dominate much of contemporary society, such as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, imperialism, ableism, settler colonialism, and punitive approaches to conflict and harm, are constantly at work in the minds, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors, of every individual who is acculturated in this society, unless they consciously work to unlearn them. These harmful ways of being, interacting, and of organizing society are deeply normalized and unavoidably internalized, even among those most dedicated to dismantling these structures and ideologies (brown, 2020; Ross and Ghadbian,

2020; Spade, 2020). As a result, they manifest among abolitionist and social justice groups,

organizations, and movement spaces, often causing destructive rifts, perpetuating trauma, and re-

entrenching the very powers and systems the movement exists to dismantle. As Ross and

Ghadbian (2020) note in their workbook, *Turning Towards Each Other*,

> We live in a world shaped by hundreds of years of collective, structural harms (the legacies of brutal colonization, slavery, patriarchy) that shape the culture we live in. That means these patterns have shaped us too, and we must assume they are present in our relationships. To release the patterns of domination and violence, it's helpful to acknowledge how we may have internalized them and be unconsciously acting them out… Whether or not we have formal power, we can enact subtle and gross forms of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and other structural oppressions" (Ross and Ghabdian, 2020, p. 30).

As the authors point out, internalizing and re-enacting these harmful forms of dominant culture is

not restricted to those who benefit directly from that dominant culture as a result of their gender,

skin color, class, sexual orientation, etc. Angela Davis described this tendency in a 2014 keynote

address at the Brooklyn Academy of Music celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr:

> We know…that we replicate the structures of retributive punishment in our own emotional responses. Someone attacks us verbally or otherwise and what is our response? A counterattack. The retributive impulse of state punishment is inscribed in our own emotional responses" (Davis, 2014).

Spade (2020), touches on this notion as well:

> We bring our learned practices of hierarchy with us…so even in volunteer groups we often find ourselves in conflicts stemming from learned dominance behaviors (pp. 14-15).

Similarly, brown (2020) describes supremacy as "a collective cancer, an invisible and highly

productive disease that quietly roots deep within us" (p. 51). She describes the manifestation of

supremacy and punitive ideology within abolitionist and social jutice work as follows:

most of us have no intention of ever mimicking the state processes of navigating justice. The tools of swift and predatory justice feel good to use, familiar, groove in the hand easily from repeated use and training, briefly satisfying…Unless we have an analysis of abolition and dismantling systems of oppression, we will not realize what's in our hands, we will never put the predator's tools down and figure out what our tools are and can be (p. 44).

Cullors (2018) provides a personal example of how dominant cultural thinking manifested for her, on an individual level, when her closest friend became a drug user and sex worker: "Immediately, I responded with deep criticism…I pathologized her. I judged her…" (p. 1691), and as a result her friend ceased contact. Reflecting on her experience, Cullors explains, "I had absorbed all the myths about drug users, addicts, and sex workers. I thought they needed to be saved. Despite all my best intentions, I failed my best friend. I did not apply my abolitionist practice" (ibid.).

Brown's 2020 book *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* deals with the notion of harmful dominant cultural patterns in personal and interpersonal contexts, and movement spaces, particularly punitive "justice" and supremacy. She explains how "call out" culture—drawing public attention to a person's behavior or actions when they are thought to be inappropriate—especially when it is employed as a first resort, as she argues it has become, is a re-enactment of punitive approaches to conflict: "we are steeped in a punitive culture, which, right now, is normalizing a methodology of 'punish first, ask questions later'" (pp. 50-51).

Another example comes from the testimony of an incarcerated man who participated in a program called Success Stories, which brings feminist analysis training into prisons and other carceral settings to help impacted men unlearn harmful patriarchal indoctrination—one of the few programs explicitly tailored to helping people unlearn these dominant cultural patterns:

"I thought not doing drugs, not engaging in gang behaviors was enough, but there were aspects of my beliefs system…I encompassed racist ideology, even though I was trying to step out of that stuff, I didn't really have tools to do so" (Gayles, 2018). In a workshop based on their book (Project Nia, 2021), Ross and Ghadbian explained that these dominant cultural patterns, unless actively being worked against, will dominate individual thinking and group dynamics: "it is the default unless we are actively working against it; it runs things in the background" (ibid.).

It is essential, then, for abolitionist organizations working on reentry (and abolitionist projects generally) to develop strategies for constantly assessing how harmful power dynamics may be operating, and how to address them when they arise. As Naomi Murakawa notes in the Forward to Kaba's *We Do This 'Til They Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice*, "[a]bolition requires dismantling the oppressive systems that out there—and within us" (2021, p. xix). This is a particularly challenging area of abolitionist work, because there are no standardized approaches for how to do this, and even extensive discussions among members of such organizations can fail to produce answers, or concrete resolutions. I will illustrate with an example from my own experience as a steering committee member of an abolitionist group with reentry components. This group is Transforming Justice Orange County, a small, grassroots, abolitionist organization dedicated to fighting against carceral harm and expansion in Orange County, which includes some work on reentry. The steering committee was engaged in a conversation about hiring a formerly incarcerated person on an ad hoc basis to perform some work, such as managing the group's social media platforms, operating the mailing list, and writing newsletters. At issue was how to go about doing this in a way that did not reproduce capitalist practices of exploitation, balanced with what we also felt was an important need, namely, compensating someone for their labor. In this and other comparable instances the main

tension that arises is that of how to accomplish certain tasks with adherence to abolitionist principles, while navigating the practical reality that we live in a society that is dominated by certain cultural ideologies and practices that run contrary to these principles—in this case capitalism—and that at the end of the day, certain resources and practices—such as money, and the exchange of money for goods and services—are at some point unavoidable if one wants to accomplish certain things. We weighed the pros and cons of the situation. Our goals were to provide a reentering person with the opportunity to earn some means, acquire some skills, gain experience to put on their resume to facilitate future employment, and accomplish some tasks necessary for our organization to continue functioning and growing in the process. At the end of the day we recognized that some amount of participation in capitalist dynamics was a requirement to accomplish these goals. So perhaps the best that abolitionist groups and individuals can do for now to is maintain a solid sense of the abolitionist principles and values by which they want to abide, find ways to keep them front and center, while recognizing that some contradictory actions are necessary in order to get by and accomplish things in the world we currently live in, and simultaneously constantly take stock of these compromises, come up with agreements about how much deviation from them the group is willing to accept, how much is too much, and how to keep them as minimal as possible.

Some transformative justice organizations have provided resources for this kind of stock-taking and self-assessment, such as the aforementioned, *Turning Towards Each Other: A Conflict Workbook*. Ross and Ghadbian's workbook provides a set of tools for groups and individuals to navigate conflict, assess conflict patterns, review decision-making practices, check the influence of dominant culture, and some strategies for communication. Groups may make use of such pre-exiting toolkits, or develop their own approaches to assessing the influence of

harmful dominant cultural patterns and the conflicts that result from them. The bottom-line implication for abolitionist reentry is the importance of doing this work, whatever form it takes.

Another implication for abolitionist reentry work is the need for it to incorporate programs for active un-learning of dominant culture thinking and acting, such as the aforementioned Success Stories program. Success Stories describes itself as an "alternative to incarceration that builds safe communities delivering transformational feminist programs to people who have caused harm" (Success Stories, 2021a). They are grounded in a perspective and value base that understands acts of harm—both individual and systemic—as symptoms of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. Their 12 week programs, which run both in prison and outside of prisons, that aims to "radically reshape how people who have caused harm see themselves and their goals, and their relationships to the people closest to them" (Success Stories, 2021b), by addressing the ways they have internalized patriarchy, challenging their beliefs and values based on that internalized patriarchy, and understand how it has manifested in forms of anger, violence, and abuse, and helping them learn how to think and act differently. The program is run exclusively by peer facilitators who have been through the program themselves.

Harm and Violence Within the Abolitionist Community

Most abolitionists are still learners in the process of unlearning these dominant cultural patterns, and actively re-acculturating with attitudes, assumptions, ideologies, and behaviors that are rooted in abolitionist, transformative justice principles. Therefore, this manifestation of harmful internalized cultural patterns has led to other kinds of issues within abolitionist movement work and scholarship, such as harm and violence within the abolitionist community,

demands for "justice" that do not align with abolitionist principles, and struggles around how to center the voices and leadership of impacted people when there is disagreement.

One of the strengths of an abolitionist approach to reentry is its understanding that prisons are not designed to rehabilitate or help people, and that the punishment system and the mainstream reentry reforms that operate in concert with it rob the community of its ability to define its own needs. Through the use of internal mechanisms of harm resolution, abolitionist reentry keeps this agency within the community—and many of these mechanisms can be used to promote healing even when a perpetrator of harm is not present. However, sometimes instances of violence both from within abolitionist organizations and from without can test the conviction of abolitionist principles when it comes to their practical application.

One of the goals of abolitionist reentry work, and abolitionism in general, is to construct alternative systems of harm resolution, accountability, justice, and safety that do not rely on state systems, in order to help build self-sustaining, self-determining communities that can support people coming out of prison and help prevent them from getting there in the first place. This requires a commitment to not calling on police or the punishment system in situations where harm and violence have occurred, including, and especially, when they arise within the ranks of the abolitionist movement itself. Individuals in abolitionist organizations are not immune from harming one another, and this occurs often as a result of the internalization and enactment of harmful dominant cultural patterns. This commitment means being willing to let go of any notions of vengeance or retribution that can arise in situations where one has been harmed, and utilizing tools such as community accountability, restorative and transformative justice, and to do the hard work of reconciling with the person who has done that harm (brown, 2020; 2021; Dixon and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Kaba, 2018). It also means those who have harmed

being willing to take personal accountability for their actions. It requires the community to undertake the difficult task of facing the problems that allowed such a situation to arise in the first place, to develop and grow in order to reduce the likelihood of it happening again, or learning to deal with it if it does.

This can be especially difficult in situations such as domestic violence or sexual abuse, where the knee-jerk reaction (even among abolitionists) is sometimes to demonize the individual who has committed the harm, rather than walking the talk of approaching such acts in the social contexts within which they are situated (brown, 2020; Kaba 2018), from a place of understanding and forgiveness. As Kaba (2018) points out, "This means we have to acknowledge the reality that often it is hurt people who hurt other people." Thus, it also involves remaining committed to providing support for the person harmed as well as the person who perpetrated it, and dealing with them in ways that do not perpetuate cycles of violence.

Activists and organizers engaged in this work have attested to how difficult this can be, on both an individual and communal level (e.g. brown, 2020; Kaba 2018, 2015; Long, 2020; Shank 2020; Thom 2020). The carceral state has indoctrinated us to believe that harming someone who has harmed us is what justice means. It can be difficult to escape this ideology, particularly in situations in which we are personally involved. So, this work requires something of those who participate in it; it requires a willingness to be uncomfortable, to hold ourselves and others accountable, to admit we need help, and to face situations and people that many would rather run from (Cullors, 2018; Delisle, Basualdo, Ilea, and Hughes, 2015; Dixon and Piepezna-Samarasinha, 2020; Thom, 2020). Because we do not yet live in a world where alternative options have entirely taken the place of the punishment system, not relying on state mechanisms

often requires the messy trial and error work involved in building those alternatives as they are being used (Bonsu, 2020).

The Justice Contradiction

In addition to a commitment to not calling the police to resolve conflicts, abolitionism also requires not calling for the use of other punitive state mechanisms, even in the most heinous circumstances, such as the imprisonment or punishment of police officers when they murder unarmed people of color. It means not celebrating when they are subject to the system abolitionists want to eliminate (Kaba, 2021). An abolitionist conception of justice understands that locking up the Harvey Weinsteins, Bernard Madoffs, and Derek Chauvins of the world are not examples of justice, because "justice" achieved through most of the traditional legal channels available exacerbates cycles of violence, and because such a response leaves the structural conditions and power relations that enabled such acts, unchanged. It does not allow for the hard work of accountability and reconciliation, and it employs the punishment system as a "solution" to harm (Herzing, 2021; McLeod 2015, 2019). As Herzing (2021) puts it:

> A commitment to the principles of prison abolition is incompatible with the idea that incarceration is a just or appropriate solution for interpersonal harms—*ever* (p. 134, emphasis in original)

Many versions of abolitionism call for an end to punitive and retributive approaches to dealing with acts currently defined as 'crimes'. Many of these also call for an overhaul of the very concept of 'crime', and a recognition of the fact that many acts currently defined as crimes should not be, and that many much more harmful acts are not considered crimes at all (e.g. Karaktsanis, 2019; Liazos, 1972; Pate, 2008), as in this example from Calathes (2017):

Exploiting and punishing others for capital accumulation should be a crime, but is not defined as such in a racially capitalist society (Calathes, 2017, p. 452).

And another from Pate (2008):

Imagine if we chose to reject current theories of crime and criminality and instead chose to focus on trying to prevent—and, when unsuccessful punish—those who perpetrate the most harmful behaviors: those who wage war. Why hasn't Bush been indicted for war crimes or crimes against humanity? What about those who hoard essential goods, make excess profits, irresponsibly and negligently handle toxic cargo, crimes against social harmony, economic and/or even governmental order? What would the system look like if we prosecuted and sentenced people for lying while running for office, wrongful use or access to government power and public resources? (p. 83).

Abolitionists and other like-minded scholars will point out the injustice in the fact that 'street crime' is aggressively criminalized, while the actions of those in positions of power who make decisions resulting in violence, oppression, and exploitation of entire segments of the population, are not even considered crimes. However, this is in conflict with the goal of challenging or eliminating the notion of 'crime' and retributive approaches altogether, of advocating for reconciliation rather than punishment (Knopp et al., 1976), and of replacing 'crime' with concepts such as violence or harm—which many of these same scholars often call for.

Scholars and activists frequently express upset that many individuals in positions of wealth and power are able to act so often with impunity, and this again raises the issue of what counts as 'justice' (Carrier and Piché, 2015). Very often discussions about revising the concepts of crime and justice tend to involve calling for the need to indict those responsible for the kinds of sweeping, detrimental harms and slow violence that corporate, organizational, institutional, and white-collar crimes tend to produce (e.g. Liazos, 1972; Ward, 2015). Would this upset be quelled if these individuals were subject to our current punishment system, the very system

abolitionists want to do away with? Or if they were punished, despite the abolitionist goal of replacing punitive and retributive approaches with alternatives? These are issues and questions which abolitionists have yet to work out. It should be pointed out as well that these are not necessarily contradictions that exist in the thinking of individual abolitionists, but within the ideas, goals, and values of abolitionist thought as a whole. Something approximating a unified perspective that can find agreement on this issue will likely be important if abolitionists hope to institute desired changes in any kind of a significant way.

A large part of this problem, the reason this contradiction exists, is due to the power of dominant cultural thinking, specifically in this case a punitive mindset, discussed above. For instance, Platt (2019) argues it is a problem that "nobody went to prison. Nobody was even criminally prosecuted" (p. 7), for many heinous white collar and corporate crimes, such as the 2008 financial crash. This demonstrates how punishment and prison are so frequently the first, or primary 'resolution' considered: justice being served is equated with these individuals being prosecuted and punished.

An interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates, on the Justice In America Podcast, highlights some of the issues at hand.

> *Smith*: folks…will present a very anti-prison platform…we should abolish prison, the prison industrial complex is holistically horrific…*until* someone they don't like, whether it be in the Trump administration, or somewhere else, commits a crime, and it's fascinating because then I see those same people, who are like 'lock 'em up, put em in jail, put em in prison, Paul Manafort needs to be locked up,'…It's just interesting because people present themselves as prison abolitionists and then that becomes inconsistent when…they want Donald Trump to go to prison…I'm sympathetic to how difficult it is because it's hard, it's hard to escape this, the mindset that we've been inundated with, around punishment, right? And especially when it's someone who we see as like, really deserving of punishment…
> *Rice*: it's the same thing that you see with like DA elections, right? Anita Alvarez in Chicago treated black and brown and poor people in Chicago like horribly, for a decade, and it wasn't until she didn't prosecute a cop for a shooting, for shooting Laquan

MacDonald that people were *as* outraged. Now people have been organizing around Anita Alvarez for a while, and I'm not saying that we shouldn't prosecute state actors when they…abuse authority in that way, but I'm only saying that what actually galvanizes people, is leniency, in a way that is hard to reconcile with the amount of people who seem at least invested in the idea of mass incarceration and the harms it's caused…

Coates: If you'd asked me when I wrote ["The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration."] I probably would've said I don't think prisons should be abolished. I would've told you that there are people who do horrible things who probably should be removed from society. But the second question is of course, what percentage of those people – I mean you can't take the most extreme case, and then make the argument for the entire system, especially given the size of mass incarceration…

Rice: Then there's this other thing, which is to say nobody should be in prisons *as they exist right now*. Nobody should go through the system as it exists right now. It's fundamentally unjust, fundamentally unfair. You can be Ted Bundy, and enter the system—

Coates: —The system as it exists right now would not be fair to Ted Bundy.

Rice: It's just not fair. It can't play fair sometimes and play unfair other times, because apparently it's diseased. The system is diseased.

Coates: the worst people deserve fairness, and this is blanketly an unfair system.

Rice: Who decides who the worst people are?...the system has to serve the guilty in order to be able to serve the innocent. And I think that if, and again I don't necessarily know what this looks like, but there are countries where people are in prison, and it is a much more humane system…You want some sort of accountability, but can that accountability…can it come from where it does right now?

Coates: This is a basic problem of legitimacy, I mean who would you trust to make that decision?...

Smith: There are a not insignificant amount of people who see that administration, the justice system, ice, border control, doing exactly what they should be doing. When they imagine what justice should look like, that is justice to them. How do you speak to, or push back against those who…When you think about the fact that the things that would create empathy and outrage to some, are the very things that would be like, oh well, you're telling me about how good a job the system is doing, how do you speak to those very different audiences.

Coates: I don't think you can…What you're writing against is not facts, you're writing against literally centuries of mythology. How do you beat that?...(Rice and Smith, 2018)

This conversation touches on a number of the points raised above, the first of these being

what I am calling the justice contradiction, both in Smith's point about progressives who support

abolition saying that Trump ought to be locked up, as well as Rice's point that "what really

galvanizes people is leniency"—while in the very same breath, Rice remarks, "I'm not saying

that we shouldn't prosecute state actors when they…abuse authority". And where Coates brings

up the common argument that there may always be some people who should be removed from

society, he responds to his own point with the same argument made by Kaba, that it makes little

sense to construct an entire system based on the most extreme cases. Smith explains that he is

sympathetic to those caught up in the justice contradiction, because he understands the limited

options available in terms of being able to think of responses outside of punishment, because of

the power of carceral ideology. And Coates raises this point again when he talks about working

against "centuries of mythology" surrounding the criminal punishment system. While Coates,

Rice, and Smith do not arrive at a solution for the issues they raise, their conversation makes an

important contribution to abolitionist thought and praxis, by attempting to work through these

complexities.

In an interview for the Making Contact podcast, Mark Lamont Hill also comments on the

justice contradiction, offering some explanation for why it exists, as well as offering a solution:

> what happens is, when someone steals *our* TV, when someone does harm to *us*, or even
> when these cops kill, our first thing is 'lock em up'. Now I understand that's our only
> recourse in the context of this moment, and cause they lockin' us up, we have to have
> some kind of response, I'm not minimizing that, but our ultimate goal can't be a world
> where cops get locked up for killing us. Let's have a world where cops are demilitarized,
> and disarmed, so they can't kill us so that prison doesn't become somehow our end goal.
> We have to reimagine this thing (Salima, 2019).

Part of the reason that incarceration and punishment, are so frequently the "solution" proposed to

deal with injustice, even among those who denounce the criminal punishment system, is that

among non-abolitionists, it is thought by many to be the only response we have. And as we have

seen, the problem persists among abolitionists as well, in situations where dominant cultural

ideologies, such as carceral ideology, are not actively challenged, and as a result, are "running

things in the background" (Project Nia, 2021). And as Hill points out, there has to be some recourse available when police shoot unarmed citizens, when decisions are made by high-level corporate executive or government agents that cause great harm to great (or any) numbers of people. And this is part of the reason why building up alternatives, not just in practice, but that are readily available for use, and for the public imagination, is so important.

The abolitionist project then, will not involve simply dismantling the current system while constructing alternatives to render the existing system obsolete; it is a project of reverse engineering the carceral occupation of psychic space, of creating new schemas for the public imagination. Thus, it is essential for abolitionist projects to involve ideological, as well as material components and strategies, for addressing concrete conditions, effecting decarceration and the construction of alternatives, and for expanding the imagination in order to theorize and strategize new societies, new worlds, new ways of being. I will revisit this subject extensively in Chapter 5.

One could argue that when individuals who would otherwise support an abolitionist project, advocate for punishing or even incarcerating those who they believe have committed the most egregious harms—police shooting unarmed black men, government officials making decision that bring harm or death to entire populations, or white collar and corporate crime— what they are really looking for is accountability, and justice. To this extent, then, if an abolitionist strategy is going to answer to the most important concerns, particularly in an approach to reentry, it is going to have to a) have mechanisms for holding people accountable, and b) articulate a precise conception, or definition of justice—one that answers to the needs of groups and individuals who are most often victims of harms of all forms, in ways that common

conceptions of justice do not. This, too, is a point I will take up in the discussion of an abolitionist theoretical framework.

Implications of Centering the Leadership of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated People

Another significant tension within abolitionism has to do with one of the primary features of abolitionist work, namely, centering the voices and leadership of incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and system-impacted people. What happens when these individuals take a position with which others in the organization or the community fundamentally disagree? The tension between the radically progressive, socially conscious, inclusive culture of the abolitionist movement, and the racist, patriarchal, heteronormative prison culture that clings to many who are in the midst of transitioning from prison back into society (e.g. Martin, 2018; Trammell, 2012) is an under-discussed and under-theorized subject in abolitionist work, scholarly or activist. Abolitionist organizations and communities do their utmost to give deference to the voices, experiences, histories, and needs of oppressed groups—people of color, indigenous, and gender nonconforming people, and those with disabilities. They are constantly seeking ways to avoid reproducing or repeating patterns and practices of white supremacy, patriarchy and predatory capitalism. In stark contrast, prisons indoctrinate reactionary violence, toxic masculinity and machismo, racism, sexism, and homophobia (Kupers, 2010; Trammell, 2012). This can produce friction in situations where recently released people are working in abolitionist organizations.

Perhaps an even more interesting question is, what happens when incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people do not endorse abolition? This is another instance in which abolitionist praxis may have its convictions tested. If an organization has worked to elevate and center the voices and agency system-impacted people, is the organization committed to

following them, even if that means following them out of an abolitionist approach? Some people who have been incarcerated simply do not adhere to the belief that no one should be incarcerated, and will say things like, "I've been inside with some sick people who should never be let out."[24] This is an area of abolitionist thought and practice that has yet to be worked out or resolved, and has implications for every area of abolitionist work.

Concluding Discussion

Because my goal here is not to eliminate these tensions and challenges by attempting to provide definitive solutions in every case, I leave many of these questions unanswered. My aim is to bring to light some of the unresolved and difficult areas of abolitionist thought and work, and some of the ways that they do, or could, impact abolitionist reentry in particular. The real work of resolving these issues will mostly likely not take place in academic discussions, but among the people working on the ground to actualize abolitionist visions, through reentry work as well as broader abolitionist efforts, and it is through further study of hands-on abolitionist work that we are mostly likely to find answers to these questions. Thus, the following chapter will provide a discussion of abolitionist visions and strategies, intended to aid in scholarly work of abolitionist theorizing, and on-the-ground praxis of actualizing abolitionist visions, according to abolitionist principles and values. It will also explore what it looks like for abolitionist work—scholarship and activism—to be guided by these values and principles.

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[24] Based on personal conversations the author has had with formerly incarcerated people involved in abolitionist work; there is essentially no mention of it in the literature, academic or activist.

CHAPTER 5: ABOLITIONIST VISIONS IN ACTION

This chapter explores specific ideas and examples of what an abolitionist vision looks like in practice, what looks like to construct self-determining, liberated communities that productively support people coming out of prison. It describes some of the necessary theoretical and practical components of this vision, and discusses strategies for how to get there. The goal here is not to put forward a vision of abolition that is entirely original, but one that emerges from the synthesis of historical and contemporary academic and non-academic abolitionist writings, the author's direct participation in community-based abolitionist work, and secondhand accounts of activists engaged in emancipatory struggle, as culled from the writings and websites of abolitionist organizations. This chapter shores up the prior discussions about abolitionist principles, and what it looks like for concrete practices like reentry work to be guided by these principles. It interrogates carceral conceptions of safety, justice, and accountability, and puts forward new definitions of these terms based upon the work of contemporary abolitionists. It also addresses how, on a practical level, navigating the critiques, tensions, and challenges discussed in the previous chapter requires reflexivity and individual- as well as organizational-level mechanisms of accountability for consistently assessing the application of these principles, and it explores examples of these mechanisms in practice.

Material and Ideological Elements

Abolition describes a vision for the future as well as a practical program of action (Cullors, 2018), so while there are a variety of approaches to and conceptions of abolitionism, they share something in common. They almost all imply or explicitly state the need for abolition to take place on two levels—a *material* level, as well as an *ideological* one. It is not only

material changes abolitionists need to make, such as decarceration and dismantling the criminal punishment system and the prison industrial complex, or constructing alternatives. Abolition needs to involve making cultural and ideological changes as well, because, as explained in the earlier discussion regarding the influence of harmful dominant culture, one of the most significant aspects of the criminal punishment system is the ideological work it performs, work on the mind, on the public imagination and public consciousness (Brown and Schept, 2017; Cullors, 2018; Davis 2005; Kaba, 2021; McLeod, 2015; Rodriguez, 2018). This ideological work involves addressing the "institutional and disciplinary forces [that] circumscribe our imagining of non-penal possibilities" (Brown and Schept, 2017, p. 441), and make prisons, policing, surveillance, and punishment appear as part of an immutable, natural order (Davis, 2005; Kaba and Hayes, 2018). I will begin by discussing specific material components, followed by ideological ones.

Material

Abolitionists practice and advocate for a wide variety of material interventions and strategies. These include activism, organizing, community-building, and policy work to decarcerate, to support and improve conditions for people inside, and aid their transitions back into the community when they are released—practices that allow communities to "meet[…] [their] own and each other's needs, based in shared commitments to dignity, care, and justice," and that allow for "practice[ing] coordinating our actions together with the belief that all of us matter and that we should all get to participate in the solutions to our problems" (Spade, 2020, pp. 39-40). And in contrast to traditional approaches, abolitionist perspectives view the work of community-building as inseparable from this task of helping people come home from prison,

because an abolitionist analysis understands that it makes little sense to work to help people transition into communities if those communities are not able to support their well-being, flourishing, and ability to contribute. Indeed, the strategies discussed here apply to abolition much more broadly than reentry work, but that is because an abolitionist framing of the problems of harm and violence entail such a holistic approach. Thus, some of the most important abolitionist reentry efforts involve grassroots work within communities to develop systems of safety, accountability, mutual aid, and harm resolution that do not rely on the state, and especially do not rely on the kind of punitive-paradigm-driven approaches the state employs (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008; McLeod, 2019; Spade, 2020).

Many grassroots abolitionist organizations talk about the importance, and hard work, of "deal[ing] with the practical concerns for safety for survivors of domestic and sexual violence" (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008, p. 10), among other forms of violence. This has included projects of developing community alternatives to 911 and creating what have become known as "police-free" zones, blocks, and neighborhoods. And several such projects are currently being implemented in cities nation-wide, by groups such as Community Action Teams (CAT) 911, the Justice Teams Network, and Oakland Power Projects, all of which are California-based teams comprised of trained community members and anyone volunteering special expertise (such as therapy or medical services), to provide alternatives to 911 that involve responses from members of the community who are as impacted by police as those experiencing police contact. These services include conflict resolution processes, interventions for mental health crises and domestic and sexual violence, cop watch services, acute first aid needs, and trainings to onboard new members and groups to provide these services (Cat-911.org, 2020; Justice Teams Network, n.d.; Oakland Power Projects, n.d.)

It also involves working for repair and restitution for those who have been harmed, on interpersonal levels, but also on much larger, societal and historical scales. NoNewJails articulates this vision in their Abolition Plan:

> No New Jails is imagining a future in which violence is not disappeared, but rather there are procedures for accountability and to address harm. We do not deny the presence of harm and hurt, but learn from other abolitionist leaders and models that community resilience and safety is possible through deep work. The world we want demands autonomy and self-determination for our community; demands humane policies, restorative systems, and community wellness (n.d., p. 46).

The work of building strong, healthy, self-determining communities, relationships between communities, and mutually supportive connections between the people who live in them usually involves a focus on healthcare, education, housing, and employment, so that people's basic needs are met (Brown & Schept, 2017; Dixon and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Kaba, 2021; Spade, 2020), and then taking this a step further, working to create and build up spaces of community and joy, spaces for arts, culture, food, music, dance, and play. Critical Resistance's Abolitionist Toolkit describes how these kinds of efforts fit in to a larger abolitionist project:

> At its core, abolition isn't only about throwing all the prison doors open wide. It is also about creating new models for living. Imagining a future based on abolition means totally shifting how we think about living with each other. We must create stable communities for people to come home to even as we work to shut down all the prisons (Agid, Berndt, Herzing, and Wohlfeiler, n.d., p. 27).

Thus, it is essential for a complete articulation of an abolitionist theory to include ideas and concrete examples of material interventions and strategies, for a) dismantling carceral institutions while simultaneously supporting those inside, b) creating community-based systems and of accountability, harm resolution, and repair, and c) building up communities in ways that generate self-determination, power, and autonomy, and d) help us imagine, and live, new ways of being,

of relating to one another, by creating spaces for creativity, imagination, exploration, joy, and play. However, these material efforts are only one part of a complete abolitionist project. The other must intervene on the mind, on epistemic, ideological space, and the space of the imagination, to surmount the confines that carceral ideology and the punitive paradigm place on the psyches of individual and collective thought.

Ideological

The power and hold that carceral ideology has over us as denizens of US society and as inhabitants of a global capitalist era, has been called different by names by different scholars. Heiner and Tyson (2017) call it 'carceral logic'. Schept (2015)—borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus,' which describes "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316)—calls it 'carceral habitus'. Schept defines this as "the corporal and discursive inscription of penal logics into individual and community bodies" (p. 10). Scholars and activists who discuss this phenomenon have similar things to say about its effects. Heiner and Tyson (2017) argue that prisons not only incapacitate and cage people, but "they also have captured, confined, and inhabited our collective capacities for thinking, feeling, imagining, and acting" (pp. 1-2). What's more, "[a]lternative forms of community accountability and redress that break from state-centric carceral systems appear baffling, irresponsible, even monstrous" (p. 2)—and this is part of what makes fixtures of the carceral state, prisons, police, punishment, appear to be part of a natural order that makes abolition seem so unthinkable to many (Davis, 2005; Kaba and Hayes, 2018). Schept (2015) describes other insidious effects of carceral habitus. He talks about its capacity to

structure states of mind, and individual, community, and institutional dispositions that aid the system of incarceration in "structuring its own reproduction" (p. 11), which allows for disguised reconfigurations of the carceral state to be supported as reforms (Rothman, 2002), like many of those discussed here.

Perhaps one of the most devastating effects of carceral ideology is the fact that it limits our ability to imagine different possibilities. This applies not only to the general public or reformists, but to even the most progressively-minded abolitionist, as I illustrated with the prior discussion of the influence of harmful dominant culture on groups and individuals involved in abolitionist work. Heiner and Tyson describe the "epistemic occupation" effected by carceral logics, carceral ideology, so that even trying to imagine what justice means absent the concept of vengeance, and or achieving "public safety" absent the use of any state mechanisms, can be extremely difficult. Schept explains how "the hegemony of carceral logics" (p. 251) and the complete dependence of the state on incarceration as a "catchall solution" constrains our ability to think about noncarceral solutions. McLeod explains how the abolitionist commitment to more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities "remains only partially described in existing abolitionist accounts… because our present imaginative and institutional resources are constrained by the parameters of our current highly unequal world" (McLeod, 2019, p. 1619). GenerationFive, an organization dedicated to addressing intergeneration impacts of child sexual abuse through community responses, say something very similar when they point out that "[t]he daily realities of violence and oppression in our society can make it difficult for many people and communities to envision and create a more life-affirming world" (GenerationFive, n.d., p. 26).

The Role of the Imagination

Freeing the imagination, then, is an essential aspect of developing philosophies, principles, practices, and strategies of abolition, escaping dominant carceral paradigms, and expanding our capacity to envision, and create, different realities (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008; Kaba and Hayes, 2018; Smith, 2012), because we cannot build a world that we cannot envision (GenerationFive, n.d.). Smith (2012) argues that

> to be effective, political projects must also touch on, appeal to, make space for, and release forces that are creative and imaginative…The imagination allows us to strive for goals that transcend material, empirical realities…To imagine different worlds…is to believe in different possibilities, ones that we can create…Imagining a different world, or reimagining the world, is a way into theorizing the reasons why the world we experience is unjust, and posing alternatives to such a world from within our own world views (pp. 203-204).

Cultivating space and freedom for the imagination to stretch and expand and exercise and play, are necessary for abolishing the limits of our own thinking, and our ways of being and relating to one another, which in turn is necessary for the work of constructing communities based in solidarity, that can determine their own emancipatory responses to social problems, and provide sources of healing and repair (Delisle et al., 2015).

So how does one—individual or society—go about not only resisting but transcending the hold of carceral ideology? How does one exercise one's imagination and envision different worlds, social arrangements that have never existed before, or have never existed in the current context, where needs are met, where resources are distributed equitably, where a new political, social, and cultural paradigm does away with racism, homophobia, patriarchy, ableism, white supremacy, and capitalism, and instead engenders and fosters community, connection, harmony, self-awareness and self-determination, accountability, that provides fertile soil for art, music, joy, and play? This is the essence of an abolitionist vision—not one in which prisons simply do not

exist, but where they are absolutely unnecessary. Abolitionist scholars and activists have

generated a wealth of ideas in this area; they involve "say[ing] yes to one's imagination"

(Cullors, 2019), "creat[ing] new possibilities for thought and action by transforming and

expanding the shared epistemic resources that constitute our social imaginaries" (Heiner and

Tyson, 2017, p. 5). In a sense it is false to say such communities have never existed, because this

work is currently being done in grassroots organizations nationally and globally, including some

like the abolitionist reentry organizations described above, whose work involves enacting new

conceptions of things like safety, justice, and accountability through language, through

expanding our capacities to envision and strategizing new worlds, and create new social

arrangements through practice.

Blue (2006) describes the ideological part of an abolitionist project as being "to convince

people that 'a world without prisons is conceivable'" (p. 99). A significant number of other

abolitionist scholars emphasize the notion of the imagination as a central aspect of an abolitionist

project, primarily because it creates space to break out of the paradigms that currently dominate

our thinking, individually and collectively, for the exercise and expression of new ideas that we

may have no idea how to put into place yet, a space where it is okay to not have fully formed

answers (e.g. Asare, 2019; Ben-Moshe, 2013; Coyle and Schept, 2017; Cullors, 2018; Davis and

Rodriguez, 2000; Dilts, 2017; Kelley, 2003; Mathiesen and Hjemdal, 2011; McLeod, 2019;

Rodriguez, 2019; Shaylor and Chandler, 2011).

Another part of the reason this work of imagination is so important is because abolition

requires "a radical reconfiguration of relations of power [and] community" (Rodriguez, 2019, p.

1612), and because this is something so far from most of what exists currently, it demands

creative visions for what this would look like, and creative strategies for how to get there; an

abolitionist world *must* be imagined in order for there to be a vision to strive for. As Kelley

notes, "[w]ithout new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down" (Kelley,

2003, p. xii). This is particularly the case if we take abolition to be that much larger project of

eliminating and constructing alternatives not only to prisons, but to capitalism, imperialism,

settler colonialism—in essence, much of contemporary society. In this sense, "destroying the

geographies of white supremacist colonialism (reservations, plantations, prisons, etc.) requires a

fundamental transformation in how future possibility is imagined" (CounterPower, p. 77); it

requires that we "free our sense of freedom" (ibid.).

Language

One way to begin undertaking such a massive project concerns our use of language.

Language is one example of the 'epistemic resources' Heiner and Tyson refer to, and it is a

subject that abolitionists have also written about extensively, especially in terms of its power to

either confine, or expand our imaginations. Brown and Schept (2017) discuss how attention to

language can help us to escape punitive ideology; Shaylor and Chandler (2011) note that "our

language does shape what we can imagine, and by using new words and old words differently,

we can imagine new things" (p. 246). Language has tremendous power to construct our thinking

and worldviews, and in turn construct the world and the ways we interact with it. We can begin

to dismantle these deeply embedded, powerful, oppressive systems, institutions, and practices,

undermine their legitimacy, and challenge "the embeddedness of carceral logics" (Brown and

Schept, 2017, p. 444) through the use of language that brings their duplicity and their abuse to

light, and generates new ways of understanding. How we choose to employ language, what

meanings we attach to the words we use, what words we make active choices *not* to use, and

developing new terminology, are a few important ways that we can exercise our autonomy to reclaim our worldviews, resist these systems and structures on a daily basis, and begin to envision the world we want to create. Aside from the explicit decision to eliminate certain words from our vocabularies, such as 'felon,' 'criminal,' 'convict,' 'inmate,' 'offender,' etc., there are a few terms that have received particular attention among activists and scholars in the abolitionist community. Coming up with new definitions and associations for these terms is especially fruitful as an exercise for expanding our imaginations. Three such terms that I will dedicate extensive discussion to here are 'safety,' 'justice,' and 'accountability'. Approaching the project of abolition through the lens of language opens up new possibilities for understanding what actions and concrete strategies follow from efforts to generate new understandings of such terms.

Justice

A number of abolitionist scholars and organizations have taken on this subject in a focused manner. One of those is Allegra McLeod (2019). In her paper, "Envisioning Abolition Democracy" she looks at the work of one particular organization, the LetUsBreathe Collective, created in response to the Burge incidents in Chicago, where white detectives from the Chicago Police Department working under the command of Jon Burge tortured up to 200 African American men and women from 1972-1991, and coerced them into signing false confessions for serious crimes they did not commit, which they did out of fear for their lives. Years later, in 2015, because of the work of abolitionist and social justice organizations such as Black Lives Matter, the LetUsBreatheCollective, and We Charge Genocide, Chicago signed a reparations ordinance into law as a means for seeking justice for these horrific events (McLeod, 2019; Sloan, 2016). McLeod focuses on the Burge incidents because, she explains, "the Chicago reparations

initiative provides one instance of what reimagining justice in abolitionist terms might look like" (p. 1628). McLeod notes that the Collective "sought justice, not through recourse to the criminal courts of civil litigation, but instead *by reconceptualizing justice* in connection with efforts to end reliance on imprisonment and policing" (pp. 1613-1614, italics added). She goes on to describe a comprehensive conception of justice, in abolitionist terms:

> Justice in abolitionist terms involves at once exposing the violence, hypocrisy, and dissembling entrenched in existing legal practices, while attempting to achieve peace, make amends, and distribute resources more equitably. Justice for abolitionists is an integrated endeavor to prevent harm, intervene in harm, obtain reparations, and transform the conditions in which we live. This conception of justice works, for example, to eliminate the criminalization of poverty and survival while addressing the criminality of a global social order in which the eight wealthiest men own "the same amount of wealth as" fifty percent of all people on earth. To approach justice in these terms requires what Professor Lisa Guenther, an abolitionist philosopher, describes as "collective resistance and revolution at the scene of 'crime' itself." Such resistance begins by unmasking the illegitimacy of much of what is subject to criminalization…Resistance at the scene of crime itself also entails working to eliminate existing punitive institutions while identifying meaningful forms of accountability and prevention to respond to actual violence and wrongdoing. Finally, such resistance involves addressing how mainstream economic practices and arrangements perpetrate violent theft every day in ways that can be thoroughly redressed only by democratizing political and economic institutions so as to prevent and respond to the highly unequal distribution of resources and life chances (p. 1615).

I quote McLeod at length because all of the aspects of abolitionist justice she describes here have important implications in this discussion. I will unpack each of them.

This is a very action-oriented idea of justice. McLeod talks about exposing, unmasking violence and hypocrisy entrenched in existing legal practices, and working to eliminate the current punishment system. This notion of justice also implies doing the work to change conditions, addressing the injustice of, for instance, egregiously imbalanced wealth distribution, the theft and violence of current structural economic practices and arrangements, and transforming these conditions. Packed into the conception of justice McLeod describes here is

the idea of building anew, working to bring about tangible change through redistributing resources, preventing harm, identifying meaningful practices of accountability and prevention, responding to actual forms of harm and violence, and democratizing political and economic institutions.

This idea of justice as praxis, as action, rather than abstract and philosophical is important in abolitionists' conceptions of justice, and contrasts with the common conception of justice as understood in the context of the criminal punishment system, what McLeod calls "legal justice" (p. 1616), and which I will refer to here as carceral "justice". Carceral approaches seek justice through individualized adjudication and punishment. Rather than seeking to achieve justice through punishment in accordance with abstract legal principles and ideals of what "justice" means, abolitionist justice is sought through accountability, and through reparation of harm. It aims to create a socially just arrangement of relationships and resources that is to a certain extent preventative rather than "justice" as something that is enacted only once a harm has been done.

This also provides an important contrast to restorative justice conceptions of justice, which do share some overlap with abolitionist justice. Restorative justice is, like the carceral approach, responsive rather than preventative. Furthermore, its primary aim is to *restore* conditions in order to bring about repairs to harms (Menkel-Meadow, 2007; Transformharm.org, 2020). In contrast, abolitionist justice seeks to fundamentally transform conditions that bring about harm and violence in the first place—such as inequality, white supremacy, and structural racism. It seeks to create a state of affairs wherein needs are met, opportunities and resources are available and equitably distributed, where relations of empathy, compassion, and mutual accountability are the norm. In this sense—as discussed briefly in footnote 3—it can be understood to share significant overlap with transformative justice, which aims at deep structural

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change in addition to a transformation in our ways of relating to one another on an interpersonal level as well as structurally.

Abolitionist justice is *material* rather than abstract. And this material notion of abolitionist justice is one that is born of experience: "abolitionists," McLeod notes, "are committed to justice *grounded in experience*" (p. 1617; italics added). In *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*, Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge (2003), similarly, contrast the conventional legal system's understanding of justice as 'getting even,' with alternative systems of justice such as peacemaking circles, where justice is understood as 'getting well'. In their discussion of peacemaking circles as an alternative approach to resolving harm in communities, they too, talk about the *experience* of justice, and describe the process of defining and arriving at justice as a collective project, rather than it being based on a definition of justice as an abstract ideal, imposed from on high, and carried out through a massive state institution, where "existing ideals of legal justice…all too often operate at such a degree of remove from the realities of legal processes as to lose sight of the aim of justice altogether" (McLeod, 2019, p. 1617).

McLeod's discussion of abolitionist justice illustrates precisely how taking this action-oriented approach to justice can help us to expand our imaginative capabilities to envision, and create a different world. It can take us from resistance against carceral "justice," to creating a new conception of justice, by: 1) not relying on the existing system to bring about justice, 2) engaging with the structural conditions that give rise to violence, harm, and injustice, 3) defining justice collectively, 4) in a way that is grounded in experience. I will discuss each of these points.

1) Not relying on the existing system to bring about justice.

McLeod describes the sentiment expressed by organizers in the Movement for Black Lives and the over 50 other organizations that joined forces to author the *Vision for Black Lives*

in response to the Burge incidents, that "the whole system [is] guilty as hell" (Justin Hansford, *The Whole System Is Guilty as Hell*), demonstrating an understanding that "the system as it exists will never offer justice for young people like LaQuan McDonald" (p. 1622)—a direct quote from one of the young Chicago organizers. Kaba employs this case of the Chicago reparations ordinance to illustrate a similar point, describing the ordinance as abolitionist in that it "did not rely on the court, prison, and punishment system, to try to envision a more expansive view of justice" (Sloan, 2016). Instead, the organizers looked beyond the criminal punishment system to find requital.

McLeod highlights specific reasons why reliance on the current system made little sense in this case, and would make little sense in many circumstances. Litigation, she points out, "is limited by legal rules that are not necessarily designed to promote justice" (p. 1627), including the statute of limitations in this specific case, which would have halted the pursuit of a remedy in its tracks. In contrast, the strategy pursued by these organizer and activist groups in Chicago offered the opportunity for survivors to provide direct input into the process, and the outcome, of determining what justice would look like in this case, what it truly meant to be recompensed for the harms they experienced; this strategy also enabled the outcome to be a product of "an ongoing public dialogue between survivors, activists, and educators" (p. 1627). This approach allowed those involved in this campaign to act on and contribute to a vision of what it might look like to resolve these kinds of issues without the involvement of police, incarceration, or the punishment system.

2) Engagement with the structural conditions that give rise to violence, harm, and injustice.

Like the criteria for abolitionist programs I described above, that they be grounded in a systemic analysis of conditions of oppression, is one of the most important aspects of the concept

of justice put forward by the organizers and activist groups that McLeod discusses. The

organizers understood that justice was not something that could be achieved by demanding

accountability for individual instances. Instead, for them, justice meant situating these events in

the larger structural conditions that gave rise to them—and demanding accountability and

solutions for *those*:

> Rather than simply demand the termination of these murderous officers or that charges be
> brought against them, organizers sought to connect their outrage at these killings to the
> decades of torture perpetrated by Chicago police, and to the deeper conditions of social
> inequality, corruption, and injustice that have long characterized the distribution of life
> chances in Chicago and around the country (p. 1621).

Justice in this context does not mean demanding accountability for individual wrongdoers; it

does not mean asking anything of the criminal punishment system. As McLeod points out,

"justice would still not be meaningfully served even were all those police officers guilty of these

acts prosecuted, convicted and sentenced to prison" (p. 1639). This speaks directly to the issue of

the justice contradiction discussed in the previous chapter: justice here is not equated with

vengeance of any kind, and there is no expectation that anything will be resolved by subjecting

those who have committed harm to the same system these organizers are working to dismantle.

Instead, the remedy they pursed and the way they went about it, helped to forge a conception of

justice that highlights abolitionist justice as

> a democratically informed effort to target the causes of interpersonal harm while ensuring
> peace and well-being, and displacing policing and imprisonment in connection with
> efforts to realize greater social and economic equality (McLeod, pp. 1619-1620).

This idea of justice is as much about addressing immediate needs as it is about remaining

committed to ideals and maintaining long-term goals and vision. McLeod explains that *Vision for

Black Lives* "explores justice both in terms of far-reaching aspirational goals for transformation

and more immediately achievable policy objectives" (p. 1622). Abolitionist justice, then "entails a holistic engagement with the structural conditions that give rise to suffering, as well as the interpersonal dynamics involved in violence" (p. 1616).

3) & 4) Defining justice collectively, in a way that is grounded in experience.

Part of what the organizers did in the project of securing reparations, creating accountability, and recognizing the experiences of those harmed, was to facilitate among those affected, "a collective deliberation about what justice should entail" (p. 1626). One major difference between carceral "justice" and the conception of justice pursued and actualized here, is a focus on the *experience* of harm, and a corresponding *experience* of justice. In the traditional system, "justice" is defined by the state, both as an ideal, and as enacted in law, regardless of whether those involved experience it as justice or not; state actors make a set of decisions according to state laws, and because the system produced it, it is "justice". Part of the standard for the abolitionist conception of justice enacted here is that those who have been harmed actually *feel* that they have been adequately compensated—financially, if that is relevant, and otherwise. Those harmed walk away with a sense of resolution and closure—something the current system does not offer (Sered, 2019).

Safety

"Imagine a time when you felt the most safe". This is how Nia Wilson—the executive director of an organization called Spirithouse, a Black women-led cultural organization dedicated to empowering and transforming impacted communities—begins her TED talk (Wilson, 2017), inviting her audience to close their eyes, to engage them in what she calls the "imagine safety exercise". "Who is with you?" she continues, "What are you doing? What does the air feel like,

smell like, taste like? Is your belly full? Are you warm?" She explains that people tend to call to mind memories of cooking with their grandmother, learning how to drive with their father in the passenger seat, or sitting on the beach in the arms of a loved one—"stories of love and family and creating home—these are always the places where safety exists," she says. Safety, she explains, is being with people who love us, who we know are going to protect and care for us. Next, she presents a slide with images of automatic weapons, police, and bars over windows, and asks her audience to raise their hands if this was what any of them saw when she asked them to imagine a time when they felt safe. No one raises their hand. Wilson uses this exercise to illustrate to her audience the discrepancy between the cultural conditioning that would have us associate locks, gates, law enforcement, and guns with safety, and what we truly tend to believe about what safety means for us as individuals when we take the time to think about it from a place that is personal, rather than the knee-jerk, reactive, carceral idea of safety as defense, isolation, exclusion, and punishment. "Safety," Wilson says, "is much larger than the absence of physical danger—we feel the safest when we are loved and cared for and all of our needs are met".

This opening portion of Wilson's talk raises several themes that reappear in abolitionist discussions of safety: 1) There is a difference between the idea of "safety" as the product of cultural conditioning and fear-mongering that would have people believe that more police, more prisons, more weapons, are the solution—what McDowell (2019) calls "carceral safety"—and an actual sense of safety that means much more than the absence of violence, that means one's needs being met, being supported, loved, and cared for. 2) Getting at this deeper, positive meaning of safety, requires asking questions like "what does safety feel like, sound like, *smell* like to you?"—questions that push the boundaries of our usual ways of thinking about safety,

through the exercise of the imagination. 3) Answering these perhaps at first unusual questions about safety begins to engage us in the practice of *creating* safety, and helps us become familiar with the idea that this takes equally seemingly unusual forms—unusual that is, until we become accustomed to thinking about safety differently. These involve building relationships, and deeply and meaningfully connecting with one another, laughing together, cooking together, dancing, and creating and enjoying art.

In her paper "Insurgent Safety: Theorizing Alternatives to State Protection," McDowell provides an example of a similar kind of approach to reconceptualizing safety. She articulates an understanding and conceptualization of safety that is very similar to what Wilson describes in her TED talk. In this piece, McDowell's aim is to illustrate a new way of thinking about the meaning of safety, as an alternative to carceral safety. The elements of carceral safety as she describes it are state organized banishment, mass criminalization, and reliance on law enforcement as *the* supposed solution to violence. Carceral safety is embedded in public consciousness as part of the common-sense understanding of what "safety" or "public safety" means. And because it is understood as the *absence* of violence (as Wilson also noted), it is dependent, McDowell argues, on making certain people disappear, and on practices that take this as one of their main objects, such as incarceration, institutionalization, and deportation. Carceral safety, then, is dependent upon violent state action that dismembers communities. This conception of safety maintains hegemony over American public consciousness to the extent that it makes it difficult for most people to imagine what else safety might mean, if not police and prisons. To this extent, McDowell stresses that carceral safety has both ideological as well as material components— reinforcing the importance of abolitionism having both these components as well. If hegemony and carceral consciousness comprise the ideological component, practices of organized

banishment, reliance on law enforcement, carceral facilities, and the courts are its material components.

The project she describes in this paper, her (Re)imagining Public Safety Project, seeks to answer the question of "What does safety look like, if not carceral safety?". In her study of a Durham, North Carolina community and its activism and protests in the wake of the death of a 17-year-old Hispanic boy in police custody, she observes what she calls a "counter-hegemonic" construction of safety taking shape—a different way of thinking about what safety might mean or look like, entirely separate from the apparatus of carceral control. Working collaboratively with the Durham community that has been recently and repeatedly subject to police violence and police killings of young men of color, McDowell arrives at an alternative conception of safety that she calls "insurgent safety," by asking members of this community what safety means to them.[25] She provides them with cameras to visually document what community safety *looks* like in a way that is meaningful to them. Through participant-generated photo elicitation interviews she has them elaborate on the pictures they have taken, and describe not only what safety means or looks like, but what it *feels* like, sounds like, smells like. Her aim in not simply asking her study participants to define verbally what safety means to them is to escape from under the ideological hold of carceral safety. Because of the way carceral safety has become embedded in public consciousness, she believes that to think beyond the confines of carceral safety requires different approaches to imagining and producing an alternative conception of safety. To the extent that thinking in images, sounds, smells, can help to activate and stretch the imagination in ways that straightforward thinking do not, she asks her participants to ruminate using all of their

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[25] McDowell's is one of several such projects of engaging the community on the question of what safety means to them. Others include Morris Justice's Community Safety Wall (http://morrisjustice.org/community-safety-wall-color), and Mariame Kaba and Sarah Rhee's Community Safety Looks Like…(https://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/2013/12/21/community-safety-looks-like-imagining-justice/; https://communitysafetychicago.tumblr.com/).

senses, on what safety is to them. This is very similar to Wilson's approach to facilitating thinking about safety in a way that is broad, unconventional, and engages the imagination, and emotions other than fear. The responses she received are similar to Wilson's as well: "[h]appy sounds, people having a good time", "my grandmother's house and the smell of something cooking on the stove," noting that these kinds of answers highlight the fact that safety is very much a sensory experience.

The narrative findings of McDowell's interviews reveal several main themes or elements to her participants' conceptions of safety. A few of these I will discuss here are, 1) counter-carceral communication, 2) interdependence and mutual aid, and 3) play as an integral part of community safety. For McDowell's respondents, (1) communication is a mechanism of safety. They describe the need to bridge divides between community members, and the obstacles that lack of communication creates to community safety, especially around subjects that bring up fear, shame, and distrust. Her respondents also recognized that, "cultivating *counter*-carceral forms of communication is a prefigurative political project that can move us toward confronting the myriad ways we all internalize and reproduce the logics of carceral safety in our daily lives" (p. 52; emphasis in original).

Interdependence (2) is about learning to relate to one another in ways that acknowledge our inextricable connectedness to others, through a mindset of trust, mutual help, and shared vulnerability, it is about a community coming together to provide for the needs of its members—especially given the fact that acts of violence and harm are so often about unmet needs. If interdependence is the mindset, or ideology, mutual aid is the corresponding practice. Some of the concrete ideas about mutual aid that come directly from her study participants include sharing resources, offering practical, emotional or financial support, collective housing,

neighborhood safety patrols, free daycare services staffed by neighbors who share responsibility, communal land projects, a community fund to cover expenses for family emergencies, and block parties—all of which reinforce the idea that safety is something that comes from building relationships with those around us, from interconnectedness, and from creating spaces where it can be further imagined. Like McLeod (2019), Spade (2020), and Pranis et al. (2003), McDowell stresses the importance of understanding safety collectively, as "a shared experience rather than as an individualistic, and/or interpersonal dynamic" (p. 50). Where the carceral conception of safety is about being isolated from others—we can picture gated communities, grated windows, pedestrian-unfriendly neighborhoods, carceral facilities, and deportation—this alternative conception of safety is about cultivating interpersonal relationships and community solidarity. Under this paradigm, safety is a relationship.

McDowell talks about the role of play (3) in safety. One might wonder what play and safety have to do with one another. In some sense, perhaps the point is that they have little to do with one another. Safety is a necessary condition for engaging in activities that bring us joy, not having to have one's guard up, not feeling threatened or in danger. The absence of violence or the threat of violence is necessary for joy, laughter, and creativity. But more than this, when we engage with one another in these ways, we build and deepen relationships. In a world where many people are isolated from one another and often thinking in individualistic rather than collective terms, as McDowell argues, where our neighbors are always strangers, it is much easier to feel threatened by others if they remain strangers. Safety, according to this conception, is not something that is sought merely *in response* to violence; it requires investment and building *beforehand*. It requires taking the time to build relationships with those around us, hence the idea of communal land projects and block parties as mechanisms of safety.

The ideas McDowell discusses here are almost precisely what Wilson describes in her account of the work Spirithouse is engaged in. Speaking of how the organization came about, Wilson talks about how her local community, like many impacted communities, could not rely on police to keep them safe, so

> we had to be in the business of creating our own safety—and we did this not by going out and buying more locks for our doors …[but] by gathering together on front porches and kitchen tables, we cooked for each other, we laughed and cried together, we sang together, we wrote each other loves notes and poems…we used art and food and more art and community gatherings and deep, historical analysis and deep reflection to create a community where all of our needs could be met, where everyone is valued, and where no one is thrown away.

This approach to creating safety through building community, relationships, and fostering interconnectedness is echoed in other activists' and organizers' accounts of how communities have devised, usually out of necessity, alternatives to state mechanisms for bringing about safety. In a paper entitled "Building Community Safety: Practical Steps Toward Liberatory Transformation," Ejeris Dixon (2015), organizer and grassroots political strategist working in LGBTQ anti-violence and racial justice movements, draws on her experience as the founding program coordinator of the Safe Outside the System Collective at the Audre Lorde Project to put forward several principles for strategies of building community safety. One of these principles is relationship building:

> Violence and oppression break community ties and breed fear and distrust. At its core, the work of creating safety is to build meaningful, accountable relationships within our neighborhoods and communities…Time and time again I've known people who were saved by the relationships they built…If and when violence occurs, it's the people who live within the closest proximity who are most likely able to help us, and vice versa.

And in terms of how to do this, her suggestions echo the ideas and practices that Wilson and McDowell describe:

> Relationship building…can be as simple as attending community events, saying hello and introducing yourself to your neighbors or inviting your neighbors to events that you organize. It can be the act of talking to your noisy neighbors as opposed to calling the cops. It's about the necessity of meeting the businesses and storeowners in your immediate areas and on routes that you frequently use.

This sometimes uncomfortable work of relationship building is not something many of us are accustomed to doing. Admittedly, when my own apartment complex hosts its weekly "food truck night" in an effort to get neighbors together, most of the time I walk right by and go about my business, often failing to call to mind the fact that because of the protective, preventative power of strong communities whose members know and support one another, participating in such events *is* an abolitionist act (Schenwar and Law, 2020). This is not about the kind of work undertaken by white suburban neighborhood associations, whose goals and values are based in carceral notions of safety, that are about surveillance and exclusion, about protection from the "threat" posed by outsiders. It is not about othering people who commit acts of harm, but about creating conditions where resources are equitably distributed, where communication and exchange is fluid, where needs are met, so that there is less need for people to commit such acts, and it is about bringing them into the fold for processes of healing and accountability when they do.

Another specific example of how to engage in this process of creating safety through community-building and relationship-building is pod mapping, a practice offered by the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective. Pod mapping is "a tool…for accountability and dealing with harm in communities," (Mingus, 2020) without involving police or other arms of the state.

It involves creating a map of individuals whom one would call upon in an emergency or crisis, a situation of violence, harm, or abuse, upon whom one could depend to show up and provide the necessary aid and support. The pod mapping worksheet used in these exercises looks like this:

Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective Pod Mapping
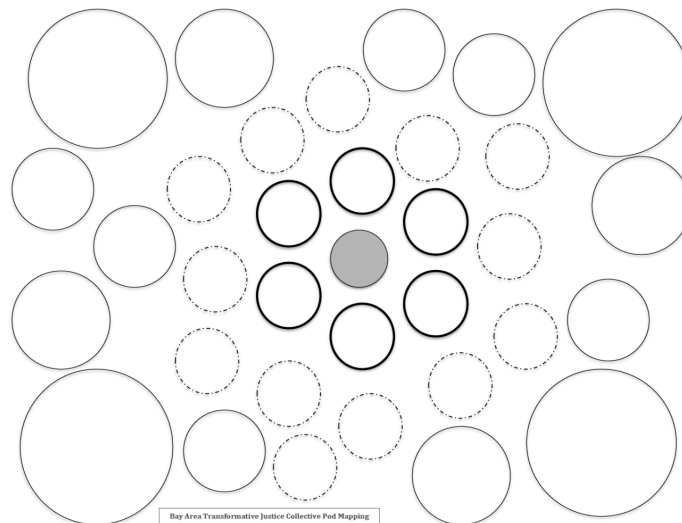
A person using this worksheet would write their own name in the center, and individuals whom they would want to call upon first, whom they trust to be sort of 'first responders' to the situation, in the surrounding circles in the first tier (Mingus, 2020; Youth Justice Coalition, 2020). In the second tier, they would put down the names of individuals they would *like* to have in their pod, but with whom they must first do some work on these relationships. For instance, perhaps someone would like to put down their neighbor in an emergency situation that would benefit from help from people in close physical proximity, but they have not gotten to know their neighbor enough for it to be appropriate, or for them to feel comfortable, calling upon them in an emergency. The last tier is for community organizations and/or resources to make use of in a crisis, such as domestic violence shelters, foodbanks, hospitals, or sources of legal aid (Youth

Justice Coalition, 2020). The idea is to fill out multiple worksheets for different types of crisis situations. One's pod is likely to be different depending on the particular need: the people or resources one would call upon if one is experiencing domestic violence might be different from those one would call upon in a health emergency. One can create as many pod maps as one expects to have situations in which to need them (ibid.).

In her TED talk, Wilson provides an example of what kind of impact this sort of work can have when it is effective. She gives an account of an incident in which two Spirithouse members were arrested and jailed. She talks about how she reached out to community members and family members, until over 50 people were gathered in the lobby of the jail with home-cooked food to support and receive their two community members who would be coming home. She describes a conversation following this incident that she had with a young man who was also one of their members, who had himself been incarcerated numerous times, and his reflections on how this kind of support, this kind of safety, would have impacted him:

> he talked about what it felt like to come from out of the holding cell, to come into a place when they hand you your possessions…all alone, and feeling rejected. And he talked about how good it would feel to come out to a room full of people who cared about you, who understood that you were more than just that one moment. He talked about what it could be like for someone who's returning home after being in jail or prison to come home to a community of people who believed that you deserved healing and to be safe…and from that tie we have worked together to bring his vision into fruition. We show up for people who have been harmed. We do the work we need to do to make sure people regain their feelings of safety and get their power back, but we also show up for people who have caused harm, understanding that the way to safety is not distancing ourselves or hiding from conflict, but it's by transforming it, and our experience has shown that by doing this, accountability looks much different.

This work of building safety through creating spaces that allow for the imagination to expand, and for members of a community to form and deepen relationships and connections with one another provides a form of safety that is about addressing harm when it arises—which it

inevitably does among human beings—but also largely about preventing much of it from occurring in the first place. These examples make evident the importance of abolitionist praxis, of activism and organizing, to create spaces where visions of what is possible can be broadened, to do the work of envisioning a different world, unhampered by oppressive structures and institutions that exist outside of that space (Heiner and Tyson, 2017, p. 28). It is in this sense that abolition is "a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice" (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 1576), a "creative imaginative, and speculative collective labor" (p. 1577).

Accountability

"Accountability" is another loaded term that means something quite different in an abolitionist context than it does in a carceral one. In a criminal punishment context, accountability is often thought of as synonymous with punishment, retribution, vengeance, and punitive action. This idea is based on a narrative that the criminal punishment is equipped to resolve situations of harm and violence in these ways, when in fact, as abolitionists point out, "the criminal legal system has proven, empirically and qualitatively, an utter failure" (Kaba, 2021, p. 134) in this regard. An abolitionist perspective maintains that while it is perhaps natural to wish harm on someone who has harmed you, or someone you love, as a basis for public policy, this approach does little in the way of remedying harms, creating space for survivors and perpetrators to heal, providing incentive for people who have perpetrated harm to take accountability, and transforming the conditions that enable that harm to occur—all of which are goals of an abolitionist notion of accountability. Commenting on this narrative, Haines, Laviña, Lymbertos, Maccani, and Shara, (2020) note:

Most of us have been deeply shaped by the false notion that in order for people to behave better they need to feel worse and be punished. In practice, we see that humans are, in fact, far more likely to change in desirable ways when they are more resourced, not less (p. 115).

The current system tends to remove resources from perpetrators of harm that are essential for healing, such as community, conversation, social capital, and spaces of accountability. It also *dis*incentivizes people from coming forward (Haines et al., 2020; Kaba, 2021):

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 (Kaba, 2021, p. 4).

An abolitionist reclaiming of the notion of accountability involves creating spaces that encourage both survivors and perpetrators of harm to come forward, and to engage in processes of healing that transform the individuals involved, and transforms conditions of harm (Dixon and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Haines, et al,. 2021).

What does abolitionist accountability look like in practice? Herzing (2021) lists the following:

Sometimes we demand concrete restitution that supports survivor and community healing. Other times, we insist on counseling and other interventions that can produce changes in behavior" (Kaba, 2021, p. 135).

Long (2020) expands on this list:

Accountability can look many different ways—stopping harmful behavior, naming harmful behavior, giving sincere apologies, stepping down from leadership roles, developing daily healing and reflections practices to address root causes of harmful

behavior, building a support pod, providing material repair, contributing to community efforts to end intimate and sexual harm (pp. 211-212).

How are these forms of accountability arrived at? Groups of abolitionist volunteers who run transformative justice and accountability processes describe a course of action that involves engaging both survivors and perpetrators of harm, carefully mediating between them, through which the person who has done harm comes to recognize what they have done, acknowledge its impact on the individuals and community involved, make restitution to both, and develop the necessary skills and resources to prevent further harm (Kelly, Peters-Golden, Alexander, Ansfield, Blum, and Rose, 2020). While there is an intense focus on the perpetrator of harm in these situations, unlike carceral accountability, abolitionist accountability does not place the burden to change entirely on the person who committed harm. The community, the society has a responsibility as well; it must create space for that person to grow, a space of forgiveness and healing, for them to take responsibility. Abolitionist accountability means holding ourselves to the same standards to which we hold people who have committed harm, recognizing that we are all capable of it. And in fact this self-work is part of what contributes to bringing about safety through abolitionist accountability:

> How do we practice belief in people's capacity to transform with the ability to see them as they are right now? We can do so by building our accountability assessment skills and practicing in relationship with ourselves (Long, 2020, p. 211).

Such practice builds the necessary skills for discerning where people are in the accountability process, and what specific behaviors are evidence of transformation.

Collaboration is an essential part of this process—on the part of the person responsible, on the part of the recipient of harm, and on the part of the community and anyone else involved.

Kelly et al. (2020), explain how they work with survivors of harm, together with the person responsible for harm, to design the accountability process, and determine what survivors need from the community, or the person who harmed them, in order to be safe and to heal. This can be abiding by an agreement not to contact the person harmed, apologizing sincerely, paying for any medical expenses engendered by the situation of harm. And there is an equal focus on providing support to perpetrators of harm, to help them create structure and balance, through concrete actions such creating space for them to check in and express emotions, giving them rides to therapy, passing along job prospects.

Kelly et al. describe how their work in this area has informed their perspective and their values when it comes to accountability:

> This humbling and more fundamentally "human" work has helped us to see that what it truly means to acknowledge that we are all in community together, that a politics of trust depends on everyday support and interdependence, and that nobody rests outside of these principles in a just society (p. 96).

Thus, another fundamental difference between carceral accountability and abolitionist accountability is about the values it is based on. It is based on values of forgiveness, healing, solidarity, support, interdependence, and a view that anyone who is willing to make amends ought to be given the opportunity to do so, and provided with the necessary resources in order to achieve this, and that they should be an active participant in this process.

Abolition as Personal Decolonizing and Transformative Work

There is another pivotal component to the development of an abolitionist vision and praxis, that emerges from abolitionist literature, academic and non-academic. Abolition is unlike many other theoretical frameworks, in that most do not make any kinds of demands upon those

who use them, about how one should conduct one's life outside of the intellectual contexts in which those theories are used. Most theories do not call upon one to live in accordance with certain values. Abolition does. It requires something personal of its proponents, particularly if one is engaged in projects of transformative justice, community accountability work, or other forms of justice alternatives outside of state mechanisms. Abolitionism is about radical social and structural change, and this requires a fundamental transformation in the ways that we relate to one another, and to ourselves. It requires a commitment to certain values, not only in academic research and writing, not only in activist or movement work, but in one's personal life as well. It requires walking the talk. Therefore, when a scholar or activist calls for an abolitionist analysis to guide projects of social change, they must also turn that call to transformation inward onto themselves. To this extent, in addition to its social and structural components, an essential component of abolition is a personal project, or project of individual self-development, a commitment to transformation and growth, and willingness to engage in work on oneself and in one's relationships with others that often requires walking through fear and discomfort, and facing and overcoming challenges in order to grow relationally, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The resounding message from abolitionist movement literature is this: *in order to build an abolitionist world, we must practice abolition in our own lives, every day* (Boggs, 2016; brown, 2020, Cullors, 2019; Delisle et al, 2015; Rice and Smith, 2019; Ross and Ghabian, 2020; Shank, 2020; Shara, 2020; Thom, 2020). As Malkia Devich Cyril says in her afterword to adrienne maree brown's *We Will Not Cancel Us:* "This is a spiritual alignment as much as it is a political one" (p. 82).

Delisle, et al. (2015) write that "[i]t is discordant to support penal abolition, on the one hand, and participate in punishment in other realms of action… (p. 4). The abolitionist literature,

particularly among the writing and testimony of activists and organizers, supports this perspective with resounding clarity, and drives home the point that "[a]bolitionist struggle forces us to examine the practices we espouse in every facet of our lives" (ibid.), that these "other realms of action" and other facets of our lives to which Delisle et al. refer, must include our own personal lives, and the ways in which we relate to others, and ourselves.

Rodriguez (2019) describes abolitionist movement work as "cultural, ideological, [and] spiritual" (p. 1602), and as a "[a] call for critical reflection at both the individual and movement level" (p. 1574). Shank (2020), a long-time organizer, explains that in addition to being a project of dismantling oppressive state systems and building alternatives on a societal level, abolitionism "is about realizing that we have a responsibility to align the ways we relate to each other with our values—from the most intimate relationship up to larger systems like the criminal and immigration systems" (Shank, 2020, p. 27). Being an abolitionist, she explains, "is a life path" (p. 27). Shara, a healing justice and generative somatics practitioner,[26] describes the work of transformative justice as not merely an alternative approach to dealing with harm that aids in dismantling carceral systems, but "a set of guiding principles toward a lifelong personal, moral, political, and spiritual development" (Shara, 2020, p. 231). adrienne maree brown describes this work as being "about deep internal shifts in our own ways of being" (brown, 2020, p. 253). Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors explains that abolition "is about how we treat each other…about how we show up in relationships…about how we respond to harm caused and how we respond when we cause harm" (2018, p. 1694). The personal, internal work that allows us to do these things is essential to larger-scale abolitionist movement work, because it aids us in

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[26] Healing justice is "a framework that identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds" (Transformharm.org, n.d.).
Generative somatics "is a mind/body methodology that builds embodied leadership to align our personal and collective practices with our principles and to heal from trauma and internalized oppression" (Generative Somatics).

abolishing the limits of our imagination and thinking, which in turns aids us the work of resisting

and challenging oppressive systems and structures, and engaging in meaningful work of

relationship building and community building, of continued development and growth, personally

and structurally (Delisle, et al., 2015). In other words, collective, social, structural transformation

of the kind that abolition seeks to bring about, also requires individual-level transformation,

because this sort of personal and interpersonal work and healing, which needs to co-occur with

structural-level work, is a building block for transformational work at the collective level

(Barnard Center for Research on Women).

Values

This personal, internal work takes many forms, requires many different things. In part, it

is about our values, about aligning our behavior and our ways of relating to one another with the

abolitionist principles we espouse for larger social and structural systems and relationships.

Cullors (2018) lays out a number of such principles. For instance, if one uses an abolitionist lens

to indict the current carceral system for the harm and abuse it perpetrates, then one must

maintain a personal commitment to not harm or abuse others. If one believes that holding people

accountable for harm caused is an important part of the path to resolving harm and violence at its

roots, one must hold oneself, and others accountable for harm caused, and be willing to be held

accountable by others. If one believes that it is essential that our ways of dealing with harm not

be reactive—in other words, that we treat those who have caused harm with understanding and

forgiveness, and a belief that they can take responsibility for what they have done, rather than

responding based on knee-jerk emotional reactions that lead us toward a desire for vengeance

and retribution—then one must remain committed to responding thoughtfully rather than

reacting thoughtlessly to harms in one's personal life. This also requires being willing to do the

hard work of forgiving people who have caused harm, including instances when we, or people

we love, are direct recipients, and perpetrators of harm. If one believes in the importance of

uprooting racist, white supremacist, heteronormative, ableist, and sexist ideologies, one must be

willing to have courageous conversations to contribute to changing people's minds on an

individual, interpersonal level. We must also be willing to have our own beliefs, opinions, and

assumptions challenged in order to uproot those forces within ourselves, and to actively and

constantly do the work of decolonizing our own bodies and minds (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). This

means being willing to admit when we are wrong, it means being willing to be called out when

we misstep. If one believes in the importance of building strong, self-determined communities in

order to actualize an abolitionist vision, one must commit time and energy toward building up

one's own community. This can sometimes involve steps that many of us are not used to

taking—truly getting to know our neighbors and local business owners, participating actively in

our communities in ways that work to dismantle surveillance and carceral notions of "safety," as

well as learning about community needs and working to fulfill them, etc. (Cullors, 2019).

In 2012, an Oakland-based organization called Creative Interventions that aims to create

community-based alternatives for interventions in situations of interpersonal violence, produced

a 578-page toolkit, "A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence". The toolkit is an

extensive, detailed analysis and practical resource guide to dealing with violence through

community-based interventions. Part of this resource includes a guide for how participants in

transformative justice processes—whether as survivors/victims or perpetrators of harm—can set

realistic goals for the outcome of these processes. They acknowledge that intense feelings of

anger and fantasies of retribution are a normal part of this process for survivors, and they

emphasize the importance of expressing these emotions. They note, however, that one of the primary questions that should guide the goal-setting process is "Does the goal fit with my values?". Values in this case, can act as an anchor for a person who has experienced harm, who is often experiencing a host of intense and negative emotions, a reminder of one's commitment to the idea that everyone deserves a chance to be heard and understood, that most often people who have caused harm are victims of harm themselves. This case provides an example of the importance, as an abolitionist, of living and conducting this work in accordance with abolitionist values.

Spiritual Self-Work

Another component of this internal work that has been noted by many working in the abolitionist movement, is spiritual self-work. In her book *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown describes a sign she saw hanging on the wall of Grace Lee Boggs' home[27] that read "Building community is to the collective as spiritual practice is to the individual". To avoid an entire foray into what exactly "spiritual" means, I will assume a broad definition, encompassing the emotional work of healing trauma or emotional baggage,[28] attending therapy, cultivating spiritual healing or self-care practices of any kind, such that one can achieve or work toward personal accountability, compassion and empathy for others—even those who have committed heinous acts of harm—connection, trust, and fluid communication with others, peace with oneself in mind and body, working through fears, personal challenges, discomfort, shame, binary thinking that tends to like to categorize people or their actions as good or bad, and accepting that

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[27] This quote has also been attributed by some to Boggs herself.
[28] I am thinking of this spiritual component in a similar sense to the American Society of Addiction Medicine's description of addiction as a "spiritual" disease (American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2011).

people are complex and full of contradictions, that contradictory emotions and beliefs exists, and making room for them, in oneself and in others, and understanding that we are all capable of harm, and of good.

This requires that we do the hard, internal work of healing past traumas, asking ourselves difficult questions such as "What mistakes might you need to face in order to trust yourself? What hurts are you carrying that remain unmourned?" (Shara, 2020, p. 231), allowing ourselves to feel uncomfortable and painful feelings, including "regret for actions we've taken that violate our own values" (p. 227). It requires confronting the fact that under oppressive social structures, we may "have been targeted and denied our full humanity" (p. 230). Even if one has not experienced a particular harmful, or traumatic situation, there is other healing that needs to take place, simply as the result of living "within a capitalist, eco-murdering, settler-colonial, ableist, white-supremacist heteropatriarchy" (Shara, 2020, p. 230), from which almost no one living in contemporary society is immune. For some of us it is about coming to terms with the fact that we have benefitted from unearned privileged at the expense of others, because we live in a society that does violence to everyone. Staci Haines, co-founder and executive director of Generative Somatics, and co-founder of GenerationFive, reiterates that even those who are fully committed to social justice causes are shaped by oppression, privilege, and the trauma that results from it: "we can't not act that out, unless we've done the deep, internal and mutual work of transformation…It's more than cognitively understanding it…it's a very deep skillset" (Werning, 2018).

The earlier-discussed exercise of pod-mapping is one that requires this kind of spiritual, or personal self-work, because the goal of creating these maps is not simply to list people's names to plan for crisis situations, but to grow or develop one's relationships with these people

(Dixon and Lakshmi Piepezna-Samarasinha, 2020). It is important to obtain the consent of the people one plans to include in one's pod, to communicate expectations, to find out if they have the capacity or willingness to be called upon in such situations. Sometimes certain relationships have to be changed before it is appropriate to include someone, and this can be challenging, difficult work. It requires vulnerability, communication, and trust. This project of relationship-building is long term. For instance, if someone is in recovery from substance abuse, and would like to plan to call upon their mother for help in the event that they relapse, but they have not told their family about their substance abuse problem, this requires them to do that. Communicating one's needs and expectations, and perhaps broaching topics of conversation that have been avoided among certain long-standing relationships can open up old wounds and create potential conflict. The invitation to address, work through, and heal such conflicts also opens up the possibility for deeper connections. An abolitionist perspective understands strengthening relationships as a crisis prevention measure in and of itself.

Another example is if a person wants to create a pod map to deal with a situation in which they themselves cause harm. Even the idea of planning for such an event is foreign to many people. It requires acknowledging that one is capable of causing harm, and a willingness or a desire to take responsibility for one's actions, which not everyone is accustomed to doing. It requires that the person ask themselves if they have people in their life who will hold them accountable, who will provide support and understanding even in the event they hurt someone else, or commit some morally atrocious act. If the answer is no, it requires that one build those relationships, which can be a life-long project of self-development.

Accountability (Ourselves and Others)

This willingness to hold oneself accountable is another form of self-work that abolitionism requires. As Shank explains:

> If we are going to build movements capable of winning, we have to win for all of us. This means fighting white supremacy, racism, transphobia homophobia, sexism and economic oppression in all their forms, even and especially when it means we have to look in the mirror. It means holding ourselves and each other accountable (Shank, 2020, p. 34).

As her statement highlights, self-accountability takes different forms. There is the self-accountability that asks us to be constantly engaged in the practice of examining our own assumptions, doing the necessary work to decolonize our own minds to be rid of implicit biases and assumptions, to recognize our privilege, to revisit and revise our understandings of what language is oppressive or harmful and why, to remain humble and teachable. And there is the kind of self-accountability described in the pod-mapping example above, which requires recognizing that we are capable of causing, and sometimes do cause, harm. This form of self-accountability tears down the walls that social conditioning would have us place between those who cause harm and those who are victims of it, not only creating this false binary, but causing us to distance ourselves from 'bad people', 'those who deserve to be punished,' and define ourselves in opposition to them. As author and community healer Kai Cheng Thom writes:

> When we are able to admit that the capacity to harm lies within ourselves—within us all—we become capable of radically transforming the conversation around abuse and rape culture. We can go from simply reacting to abuse and punishing 'abusers' to preventing abuse and healing our communities. Because the revolution starts at home, as they say. The revolution starts in your house, in your own relationships, in your bedroom. The revolution starts in your heart (Thom, 2020, p. 69).

Having a relatively well-defined set of values, cultivating awareness of when we act out of alignment with those values, and determining ways of bringing our behavior in line with them, can aid us in holding ourselves accountable.

Shannon Darby of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, advocates for a daily practice of evaluating our choices and looking at how well those choices reflect the values we aim to adhere to. At the same time, she acknowledges that there will always be *some* discrepancy between our actions and our values, because each individual, just as each community, is forever a work in progress. Therefore, that daily practice also needs to involve some plan of action for when behavior and choices do not align with values, "which may involve simply apologizing to someone who you were short with yesterday" (Barnard Center for Research on Women). For larger kinds of challenges, such as, for instance, seeking to make amends and repair to a person one has abused, she notes the importance of seeking help and support from trustworthy individuals in one's life. This process of taking daily stock of one's actions to determine how well they correspond to one's values are strikingly similar to the practice of 12-step recovery programs—which advocate a spiritual solution to addiction problems—known as a "10th step," in which one takes a nightly inventory of one's day, to determine where throughout the day one might have acted based on anger, fear, or resentment, where one has been dishonest, how might one have treated others badly as a result, and how to practice spiritual principles of the program to address these very natural mistakes that are a part of being human (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001; 2013). Darby's point that some of these personal projects ought not be taken on alone are also very similar to the 12-step philosophy which maintains that it will serve the recovering individual best to draw on the help and support of their fellows in order to overcome adversity, and help them stay in line with the values according to which they are

attempting to live. In fact the entire 12-step program rests on the premise of "we don't do it alone".[29]

Acceptance and Forgiveness of Others

As some of the excerpts above have touched on, acceptance and forgiveness of others, in addition to ourselves, is another essential component of this challenging self-work required to remain in line with abolitionist values. This includes avoiding judgment of others, for example, calling the police, or advocating police cooperating in some circumstances. Judgment ostracizes those who are judged, just as much as it isolates those who do the judging, because it contributes to a *culture* of judgment that makes it difficult for people to admit to acting in ways they are ashamed of, makes it difficult for people to ask for help (Dixon, 2015), which can create obstacles to individual and collective healing.

Acceptance and forgiveness of others also must include instances in which someone has committed harm or abuse. Kaba (Rice and Smith, 2019) talks about the urge in us as human beings that wants people who harm us to receive harm themselves, the desire for vengeance, to wish death on someone who violates us or hurts our families. This, she notes, is a primal instinct, and a natural response to harm done to us and those we love. The challenge is to move beyond this initial urge, this knee-jerk response, because resorting "immediately to punishment means that we stay on the surface of what has happened" (brown, 2020, p. 251). To transform the conditions in which such harm takes place to begin with, we must ask ourselves why it happened. And this can be a frightening and difficult move, because "'why?' is often the game-changing, possibility-opening question. That's because the answers rehumanize those we feel are

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[29] Source for this information about 12-step programs is the author's own experience.

perpetrating against us" (p. 251). Usually the answers to questions about why a person has

committed harm involve things like grief, abuse, trauma, mental illness, socialization, childhood,

scarcity, loneliness. But what's more, "'Why?' makes it impossible to ignore that we might be

capable of a similar transgression in similar circumstances" (brown, 2020, p. 251). Haines et al.

(2020) explain the importance of this for the larger collective project of social and structural

transformation that abolition aims for:

> For many people, the idea of giving attention to the healing needs of a person who has been
> sexually abusive is difficult to tolerate, [and yet]…recognizing and attending to the humanity
> of those who harm is a central aspect of transforming our families, communities, and
> society…By standing for everyone's needs for healing, we challenge the dehumanizing logic
> that is central to systems of oppression, domination, and abuse. By standing for everyone's
> needs for healing, we maintain our commitment to a vision of true liberation (p. 118).

It is essential in this work that we contribute to building a society in which "no one rests outside"

[the] principles" (Kelly et al., 2020, p. 96) that we would like that society to embody, such as

acceptance, compassion, empathy, forgiveness.

Acceptance of Contradictions and Complexity

Practicing these principles in all of our affairs requires us "to confront our own

contradictions about who deserves connection, compassion, and forgiveness" (Shara, 2020, p.

231). It requires recognizing our own complexity, and that of others, and accepting that

contradictions exist within ourselves, and within others. It requires letting go of the

aforementioned binary, black and white ways of thinking, and transcending thinking in

dichotomies of good/bad, right/wrong, deserving/undeserving, because "abusers and survivors of

abuse do not exist, and have never existed, in a dichotomy: sometimes, hurt people hurt people"

(Thom, 2020, p. 67). Thom explains that "we cannot think of abusers as incomprehensible

monsters who must be exterminated—because abusers are also our heroes, lovers, friends, family" (Thom, 2020, p. 68). Shank (2020) writes about a personal experience of sexual harassment from someone of significant status within the abolitionist movement community she works and lives in, and her process of coming to terms with it, which required, in part, coming to terms with the wholeness of the person who abused her and other women:

> On one level, he has harmed and betrayed people who trusted him. Yet on another he has demonstrated that he is willing to work to build a better world. He is a complex person, like all people, full of contradictions (Shank, 2020, pp. 38-39).

Similarly, it is important to hold space for contradictory thoughts and desires that exist within ourselves (Brooks and Kaba, 2020). For instance, Long (2020) points that as survivors, fantasies of revenge against one's abuser on the one hand, and the desire for them to receive the community and support they need to heal and transform on the other, often co-exist. And in fact, Long notes, the act of honoring such contradictions is part of what makes transformative justice and community healing and accountability possible, because finding safe ways to handle such emotions is part of the healing process (ibid.).

Behave "Science Fictionally"

Finally, another component of this personal, internal work that is essential for abolitionists—to borrow a term from adrienne maree brown—to 'behave science fictionally' (brown, 2017). This is about "being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations" (p. 16). This is a call for us to comport ourselves in the world with a constant sense of how our beliefs and actions today will shape the future, will shape coming generations, the world they live in, the planet we currently inhabit, and

the one our children and grandchildren will inherit. It is an exercise in imagining ourselves in terms of the future ancestors that we are, and aligning our beliefs, values, and actions, in accordance with that. This encompasses how we behave—acting in ways that contribute to, and do not detract from, the well-being of the planet (how much integrity can an abolitionist who does not recycle, possess anyway?), and, as most abolitionists do, taking action to work toward building a better world. But it also encompasses our attitudes and outlooks. Being able to commit to building a different, more liberated world requires a certain amount of hope and faith. It requires that we not get bogged down in a morass of despair or martyrdom—despair at the state of the world and the magnitude of the fight before us, and the martyrdom that can sometimes afflict those working in movement-building spaces, which have themselves absorbed capitalist values like workaholism, and maximum productivity and efficiency sometimes at the expense of well-being. Moments of frustration, anger, sadness and despair are sometimes unavoidable in this work, and it is important to hold space for them. But to maintain an overall belief that this new and better world we work toward is possible, accompanied by a sense of how we ought to comport ourselves in our daily lives as ancestors of future generations who will inherit that world, are essential. But, as in the above discussion regarding adherence to values, these are aspirational goals, and not something we can do perfectly. We can expect to fall short sometimes, and that is okay too, as long as we are willing to continuously strive to live in accordance with these principles.

Connecting Individual and Collective Healing

This notion that collective and individual healing are separate projects at all, some argue, is because individual healing has been de-politicized, treated as if it is even feasible separately

from healing the collective (Werning, 2018). "Oppression is traumatizing" Haines notes, so to de-politicize healing perpetuates oppression. Those who work at the intersection of social justice/activism/abolition and individual healing, such as Haines, argue that it is essential for these projects to be seen and understood as one in the same, in order to recognize how their separation perpetuates trauma, but also so that the individual and collective healing required for social transformation can take place. They note that while some healing does need to take place on an individual basis, this is not its primary site, or home (Werning, 2018): "I can't see liberation movements without healing, and I can't see healing without liberation movements" (ibid). In other words, individual healing and movement building must go hand in hand.

This is reflected in some of the abolitionist approaches to reentry that have been discussed here, which fall into the category of "transformative interventions" Currie describes. These are interventions that aid people to situate themselves in the structural contexts that produced their conditions of oppression, such as FOCUS's incorporation of community organizing training as a component of their reentry assistance, and A New Way of Life's partnerships with Critical Resistance and All of Us or None, to provide political education to the women going through that program, driven by the recognition that activist and civic engagement are pivotal elements of a reentering person's healing process, but also by the perspective advanced by Kenneth Clark (1965), that impacted communities and the people in them ought to be seen not as problems to be solved, but as resources for community transformation. The idea in contemporary abolitionist reentry work that civic engagement, activism, and community transformation work themselves function as constructive interventions for those who engage in

them is an echo of Clark's much earlier expressed ideas (Clark, 1965; Currie, Goddard, and Myers, 2015).

Of this necessarily co-constitutive project of individual and collective healing and transformative work, brown notes:

> the work of cultivating personal resilience, healing from trauma, self-development and transformation is actually a crucial way to expand what any collective body can be. We heal ourselves, and we heal in relationship, and from that place, simultaneously, we create more space for healed communities, healed movements, healed worlds (brown, 2017, p. 192).

Part of the reason for this is that there is a sense in which, as noted earlier, personal healing work is a "building block" for collective healing (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2018). This is exemplified in the work of individuals such as Sonya Renee Taylor, who focuses on body acceptance and radical self-love, but connects these personal, internal projects to projects of collective healing and racial and gender justice, emphasizing the power of this individual work to bring about larger-scale change:

> Our relationships with our bodies helps to create the world we live in. And we get to decide 'what is the world I want to create inside of me, so that I can be intentional about the world I want to create outside of me?' And making peace with our body is how we get there…When we don't do that, we actually replicate the systems that already exist. Because they're still in us, they're still the tools we're building from…We say we want a world that is equitable and just and compassionate, while we have inequitable, unjust, mean relationships with our own selves…It requires of us our work. It requires of us to cultivate inside of us, that which we say we want to bring about in the world (Scritchfield, 2018).

Taylor's work is in part, about helping people who struggle with their relationships with their bodies, to understand that this is not an individual failing, but the product of the collective oppression performed by capitalism and patriarchy, particularly on the bodies of black women, which delineate certain standards of what a body "should" look like, and profit from people's

insecurity and self-hatred of their bodies that results from not living up to this arbitrary standard, by selling them products and services such as diet and weight loss pills, wrinkle cream, exercise equipment, plastic surgery, etc. The source of this problem is social-structural, but its manifestation is social-structural *and* individual, so it takes work on both of these levels, and it requires that individuals engaged in self-healing of this kind recognize that theirs is a common struggle, and that through deepening our relationships with others we can heal our relationships with ourselves, and vice versa.

Conclusion

Being an abolitionist requires more than applying abolitionist theories to criminal punishment problems. It requires more than movement building and organizing work. We must build within ourselves and in our interpersonal interactions, microcosms of the world we want to see, concurrent with our engagement in system-transformation efforts:

> Our vision challenges us to create a collective culture of growth and dynamic support. One that acknowledges and supports each individual's inherent dignity and worthiness of connection, while simultaneously demanding rigorous self-accountability and mutual accountability (Haines et al., 2020, p. 117).

This requires a degree of personal integrity, or at least a willingness to grow toward it. Fortunately, engaging in transformative work itself—such as community accountability or transformative justice circles—changes us: "making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us" (Kelley, 2003, p. xii). It is simply a matter of letting it, of allowing ourselves to be transformed by the transformative work we engage in, of giving ourselves over to the principles of the work and adopting and practicing those principles for ourselves, in our lives and day-to-day affairs.

Implications for abolitionist reentry

What are the implications of these insights for abolitionist approaches to reentry specifically? We have seen that building an abolitionist world means taking action to escape the carceral paradigm through exercising the imagination, and taking different action based on abolitionist conceptions of safety, justice, and accountability. We have seen that an abolitionist conception of justice in action means creating meaningful forms of accountability, responding to needs that result from situations of harm and violence and addressing the circumstances that led to them, and defining justice collectively, in a way that is grounded in experience, where the question "do you feel you've been adequately compensated?" addressed to the recipients of injustice is a standard for determining whether or not justice has been achieved. We have seen that an abolitionist conception of safety in action means engaging all of the senses, and emotions beyond fear, to think about, imagine, and build a rich, expansive, inclusive notion of safety, that it means safety as community-building through communication, through cultivating relationships, and allowing play and joy to have central roles in enacting this conception.

The subject of abolition as also being a project of personal growth supports the insights already being put into practice in a number of the abolitionist reentry approaches discussed here: that the activism, organizing, community engagement, and community building work itself transforms those who take part in it. It reinforces the idea of understanding this kind of engagement as itself being a powerful healing tool for people reintegrating into society after being incarcerated. It responds directly to the critique that mainstream reentry programs create a low standard for the quality of life of reentering people. Abolitionist reentry work sets one of the highest standards possible, namely, that of personal transformation and spiritual growth. However it also sets a standard for everyone else—all the non-incarcerated or non-formerly

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incarcerated people undertaking abolitionist work. This is not only about dismantling oppressive systems and structures; it is not only about building just alternatives; it is about dismantling the oppressive ideologies and patterns manifest in oneself, and putting abolitionist principles into practice in one's everyday life, allowing notions of healing, justice, forgiveness, and accountability to govern one's relationships with others, and one's relationship with oneself.

Abolitionist reentry must operate based on abolitionist definitions and conceptions of safety, justice, and accountability. It requires creating inclusive, open spaces to invite accountability, harm resolution, and growth both to those who have committed harm and those who have been recipients of it. And it requires that groups and organizations engaged in this work develop infrastructure for accountability to themselves and the communities they work in and with, to constantly examine the ways their processes, dynamics, and decision-making practices are reproducing harmful powerful relations and oppressive ideologies, and come up with ways of addressing those.

CONCLUSION: WHAT COMES NEXT?

This dissertation has illustrated what results when we apply an abolitionist perspective to criminal punishment issues, particularly in the areas of reentry and rehabilitation reform; it has illustrated how this perspective illuminates the ways in which reforms can reproduce the social problems they are supposedly intended to address, and point to completely different kinds of solutions. It does this by helping us to escape from under the carceral, colonial, heteropatriarchal, capitalist paradigms that currently dominate much of how we, as a society, think about crime, violence, injustice, harm, as well as how to approach reentry and rehabilitation. It reveals the dangers of these paradigms, by demonstrating how they have resulted in systems that perpetuate and sustain inequality, structural racism, injustice, violence, and oppression. In terms of reentry, specifically, I have presented in-depth critiques of mainstream reentry reforms, illustrating how they reproduce major social injustices through their lack of real attention to structural and root causes of the problems they try to solve, their systematic tendency to saddle impacted and marginalized people with the individual responsibility to change, and their failure to create a standard for the quality of life for people transitioning out of prison beyond bare survival.

The utility and power of an abolitionist perspective lies partly in the fact that the alternatives it suggests respond to these major critiques of current reentry reforms, and it provides alternatives to state system-based approaches that address root causes of criminal punishment system problems—systemic and structural racism and injustice, poverty, inequality, white supremacy, patriarchy, etc. Even given the differences regarding historical legacies of abolition and variations in abolitionist perspectives, an argument that is common to almost all of them is that because of current systems' grounding and origins in these harmful ideologies and

practices, they cannot be fixed by efforts to improve them. Thus, the abolitionist perspective implies the need to work for a complete dismantling of these current systems, and rebuilding something entirely different in their place, through efforts that are grounded in and guided by abolitionist principles of system-impacted leadership, community solidarity, equity, self-determination, autonomy, liberty, and true safety, justice, and accountability, toward abolitionist goals of a society, and a world that does not cage people as a response to social problems, a society free of oppression, free of state violence, that promotes the health and well-being of all its members.

The focus on reentry and rehabilitation is just one set of examples of how an abolitionist perspective can be productively applied to current criminal punishment issues, particularly in the areas of reform, to diagnose problems with the way the current system operates, revealing its problematic underlying assumptions, bringing a generative critical analysis that makes its harmful machinations evident, and pointing toward alternative solutions that force attention to root causes of harm, violence, and injustice. Concrete examples of current reentry programs that take an abolitionist approach illustrate this kind of work in action. The analysis presented here— examining abolitionist reentry and mainstream reentry efforts side by side—further elucidates what is problematic about these traditional approaches, and what abolitionist reentry work does differently. The abolitionist perspective might be, and indeed has been, productively applied to many other areas of the criminal punishment system and criminal punishment reform, in areas such as policing, incarceration, and immigration, suggesting and pointing toward alternative solutions to these problems too.

This dissertation has dealt with critiques and challenges in the abolitionist perspective— critiques and challenges that arise from academic debates in abolitionist literature, those resulting

from common misperceptions and misunderstandings of abolition, as well as contradictions and sources of conflict and disagreement in abolitionist work on the ground in organizing, activist, and social justice spaces. None of these challenges have straightforward solutions, but at the same time, none of them preclude continuing to take concrete steps toward actualizing abolitionist visions. They do, however, highlight the importance of keeping these concerns in the forefront and continuously working to address them. Debates between what count as carceral or abolitionist reforms, particularly where the answer is not so evident, can to some extent be worked through theoretically in advance, as I have endeavored to begin here, but must also be settled as the work is done, as those working for social justice try out various tactics and find out through trial and error if any of them result in giving more power to the carceral state without intending to do so. As Kaba states, "[W]e must experiment" (2012, p. xxv).

This points to the importance of another principle that arises often in abolitionist and transformative justice spaces and work, which is the need to leave room for making mistakes, and maintaining the insight, tolerance, and patience to learn from them (Kaba, 2021; Dixon and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Discussion about the 'dangerous few' demonstrates the need for further development of abolitionist positions on this subject, and for abolitionists to recognize the habit of deflecting the question that often occurs when this subject arises, particularly if abolitionism is to be made palatable to those unfamiliar with it who leverage this critique, often out of genuine curiosity and concern. As is the case with each of the critiques and challenges discussed here, some of this work can be done through thought, writing, analysis, and conversation, but much of it must be actualized in praxis, as groups, organizations, and communities try different approaches. Praxis can in turn inform discussion and analysis, which can then be brought back to concrete approaches. This iterative, dialectical process shows the

value of continuing to strengthen the relationship between academic abolitionist work, and abolitionist work being actualized on the ground—which this dissertation project has endeavored to do. I would venture that this partnership is incredibly important, if not essential, to the project of actualizing abolitionist visions.

To this end, I will conclude by describing some of the work that I believe lies ahead, specifically with regard to how academic work can serve on-the-ground abolitionist efforts. Part of the need to work through some of the challenges discussed here is practical: being involved in abolitionist, activist efforts, I have seen some of these tensions tear groups apart—groups that previously had been engaged in essential, life-changing work. Thus, it is important to understand how groups, organizations, and communities have encountered, navigated, and worked through such conflicts, so that the lessons from their experiences might benefit others engaged in similar efforts. Here, academic scholarship can play a role in helping to gather and analyze these experiences and present them in a form that is useful for abolitionists on the ground, and those engaged in abolitionist theory building. Three particular areas of research follow from the analyses and discussions presented here: 1) looking at how abolitionist groups balance a commitment to abolitionist principles with the practical need to function and get things done in a larger social-structural context that generally operates according to opposite principles, such as white supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy and settler-colonialism, 2) examining the tensions between formerly incarcerated and non-formerly incarcerated people engaged collaboratively in social justice work, particularly where there is conflict between centering the leadership of impacted people and other abolitionist principles, and 3) investigating the role of the imagination in abolitionist work, how groups work to cultivate abolitionist visions through the use of the

imagination, what those visions look like, and how they can advance abolitionist work, as well as larger-scale efforts at progressive social change.

1) Commitment to abolitionist principles

Working to dismantle carceral structures and systems and build up transformative, generative, and just alternatives in their place, while maintaining a commitment to not reproducing oppressive power relations, is complicated. This is particularly so when that work is carried out in a society that is governed by the very oppressive power relations these groups are working to resist and dismantle. This is the case both because practical, day-to-day operations are to a certain extent dependent on, for instance, capitalist economic practices, and because of the omnipresent influence of harmful dominant culture on individual and group thinking and values. I provided one example of this problem where an abolitionist organization, Transforming Justice Orange County, was attempting to navigate the issue of hiring a person recently released from jail to undertake some work for the organization, and how to properly compensate them for their labor without participating in exploitative capitalist practices. I suggested that in such instances, such organizations might implement a practice of regular self-assessment to take stock of the abolitionist principles they aim to commit to, all of the ways in which they deviate from them, come to an agreement about how much of this deviation the group is willing to accept, and determine ways to constantly bring actions and decisions more in line with those principles. That suggestion is based on my position as an academic, which, even steeped in abolitionist literature and informed by regular involvement in abolitionist activism, is a limited perspective—both because of the fact that it is an individual point of view, and because I lack the experience of someone directly impacted by the system. It is in the abolitionist work that organizations are doing on the ground that such dilemmas will be and are being worked out, and in that work,

where solutions will be, and are being developed by groups with greater imaginative capacity than a single, privileged academic. This being said, I envision the role of the researcher, or a research team comprised of academics and community members (categories that are, of course, not mutually exclusive), as being to provide a supportive analytical perspective and set of skills that can aid those doing work on the ground.

2) Tensions between incarcerated/formerly incarcerated and non-formerly incarcerated people engaged in social justice work

The issue of tensions or disagreements between incarcerated/formerly incarcerated and non-formerly incarcerated people engaged in social justice work is in a sense, a specific instance of the problem just described, about balancing a commitment to abolitionist principles with other practical needs. If the voices of those whom abolitionists seek to center, express opposition to abolitionist principles or goals, what does the group do? This subject raises questions about power dynamics, positionality, privilege, and conflict resolution. It also points to the need to attend to power dynamics beyond just those between incarcerated/formerly incarcerated and non-formerly incarcerated people, but between people in positions of privilege, and those who are historically marginalized and oppressed. These are complicated questions, for which, as with the dilemma above, academic analysis and theorizing is fundamentally limited in its ability to provide answers, but which will be, and no doubt have been, worked through by abolitionist groups on the ground. This is another area where empirical research, particularly through collaborative partnerships between abolitionist academics and activists could be especially helpful for not only advancing knowledge on this subject, but in supporting abolitionist and social justice work.

3) The role of the imagination in abolitionist work

The earlier-discussed subject of the role of the imagination is another area that warrants future empirical study. Developing visions of abolitionist futures requires the creative exercise of the imagination, and many groups and organizations are actively building alternative ideas to things like safety and justice in impacted communities, by working to create spaces where the imagination can thrive. Some of the most interesting initiatives involve activities of cultivating safety and justice, that take such different forms from what the carceral paradigm would typically have us think of safety as justice, that they may at first appear completely unrelated to these goals, such as those described earlier: mutual aid projects, community funds for family emergencies, free daycare services, collective housing, parties, theater, etc. Looking closely at, and becoming involved with, the organizations that are actively building the kind of safety that means everyone's needs being met, that means strong, reliable community interdependence, can provide tremendous insights for building abolitionist visions and translating those visions into practice. Specifically, this could involve looking at how creating spaces where the imagination can thrive expands capacities to envision a different world, the content of those visions, and thinking about how they can inform social change efforts, in grassroots work and perhaps policy work as well. Direct participation in the efforts on the part of the researcher is likely to be instrumental here as well, especially for scholars who strive to have a foot in both academia and abolitionist activism, and to be of service to impacted communities pursuing abolitionist goals.

Abolitionist Methodology

I believe academic work can best be of service to abolitionist efforts by culling the experiences of those engaged in community work (including the researcher themselves) and using them to support groups and organizations that may be struggling as a result of some of the

conflicts discussed here, as well as to support the development and proliferation of abolitionist visions and actions. This points to what I want to suggest is another need, and step ahead for academic scholarship on abolition: the development of an *abolitionist methodology*, elements of which can be drawn and compiled from the wealth of literature available describing and demonstrating various forms of participatory, emancipatory research (e.g. Boog, 2003; Fine, and Torre, 2006; Hall, 1992; Nkoane, 2012; Oliver, 1997, and decolonial methodology (e.g. Manzo, Brazil-Cruz, Flores, and Rivera-Lopez, 2020; Smith, 2012).

An abolitionist methodological approach would be driven by a different set of goals, and guided by a different set of values than those that traditionally characterize what most scientists and social scientists understand as "empirical research". One of the major ways I envision an abolitionist methodology departing from the values of traditional science concerns the matter of research needing to be neutral, disinterested, and objective. As many scholars have commented (e.g. Barnes, 1996; Hall, 1992; Oliver, 1997; Sohng, 1995; Spender, 1978), claiming that research is objective, and uninfluenced by the values, assumptions, beliefs, and goals of individual researchers or the agenda of those funding research is problematic on its own. An abolitionist methodological approach would not feign neutrality, but would be guided by the goals of radical social transformation, of contributing to a socially just world, and the liberty, autonomy, and self-determination of those being researched. It would eschew traditional hierarchies involved in the knowledge production process—with the researcher as the authority and the communities researched as "subjects"—it would consider members of the communities researched as experts and authorities on their own experiences. It would be highly reflexive, self-examining, self-challenging, self-critical, humble, and aware of the historical tradition through which the academy, and research on impacted communities have been harmful to those

communities. As Smith (2012) puts it: "the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (p. 1) Thus, an abolitionist methodology would recognize "research as a set of ideas, practices, and privileges that [are] embedded in imperial expansionism and colonization and institutionalized in academic disciplines, schools, curricula, universities, and power" (p. x).

And to avoid reproducing these harmful power dynamics, it would be an approach that engenders, and stems from collaborative partnerships between scholars/academic institutions, abolitionist activists, and communities, where research is done with, rather than on, the community, and is based on well-cultivated relationships of trust, respect, understanding, communication with the community, and researcher reflexivity (Sohng, 1996), where the issues to be investigated are driven by the needs of the communities or groups with whom researchers are working (Stoecker, 2012), where data is gathered through the researcher's direct participation in organizing and activist activities, and that research is undertaken an emancipatory, liberatory fashion (Watson and Watson, 2013). This might involve community members' direct participation in research question development, data collection and analysis, interpretation of findings, and any writing based on the project.

But as Smith points out, participation in research to this degree requires resources—time, energy, commitment, etc.—which can add strain to already impoverished communities; such resources are a luxury that members of these communities often do not have, so these ideals of community participation and collaboration "need to be tempered by realistic assessments of a community's resources and capability" (p. 141). This situation presents a formidable obstacle to the goals of the kind of approach I am advocating here, one for which I do not yet have an answer.

This approach of allowing the needs of a community or group—as articulated by that community or group—to determine the direction or content of research is part of what makes it emancipatory, as it contributes to a project of "transforming the social structures controlling who produces knowledge, who influences public knowledge, and who controls the knowledge-production process" (Stoecker, 2012, p. 89), by helping to re-center marginalized, activist, and community voices and ways of knowing as being just as valid as those of academics and academic institutions, if not more so. This requires a certain degree of humility on the part of the researcher, so that the endeavor of research is understood as an act of service to the community. It also makes sense for an abolitionist research methodology to be based upon measurable goals of concrete social change through supporting action on a specific goal or issue—to be determined by the community, group, or organization with which one is working—such as "changing a policy, transforming a social condition, eliminating a specific practice of oppression, discrimination, or exploitation" (Stoecker, 2012, p. 85).

All of this, of course, is complicated by different ideas of what is meant by "the community," and the specifics of that community. This approach to research will look different in a context where "the community" is comprised of severely impacted, marginalized individuals who otherwise have little affiliation or association with academics and academic institutions. In this case the idea of prioritizing the voices of the members of that community makes more sense than in a context where distinctions between "the community" and the institution of academia are more fluid. It is complicated by the identity of the researcher, whether they are part of the community they are researching or not, or in instances where university classrooms are comprised primarily of members of the community. Ultimately, perhaps the guiding priority, regardless of the specific nature and composition of the community, ought to be that the needs of

the community, as determined by members of that community, are leading the content, direction, goals, and approach, of the research.

One set of goals for this kind of research approach that Manzo, Brazil-Cruz, Flores, and Rivera-Lopez (2020) describe in their *cultura y corazón* model is 1) to "create equal partnerships with communities" (p. 5), 2) to "recognize, validate, and integrate" (ibid.) a community's cultural assets and sources of knowledge, and 3) to "provide for long-term sustainable collaborations that provide communities with practical applications to address their needs" (ibid.). In many traditional Eurocentric research models that do not include a social justice, or social change component, researchers enter marginalize communities, extract knowledge without the input of members of those communities, then reap the professional rewards that come out of this process, such as publications, funding, recognition, and professional advancement, without concern for what happens to a community after a research project is completed (Manzo, Brail-Crus, Flores, and Rivera-Lopez, 2020). On this traditional model, seeing that a research intervention contributes to the agency, self-determination, and continued sustainability and well-being of a community, through collaboration with that community, is not usually a requirement. But it should be central to an abolitionist methodological approach. Such an approach requires a consciousness, and a conscience, with regard to "how, by whom, and for whom the research is conceptualized and carried out" (p. 9), whose perspectives are being privileged, as well as an awareness and accommodation of the power differentials that are at a play at each stage of the research process.

Conclusion

Abolition is far from being merely an idealist utopia. An abolitionist theoretical lens on its own is a powerful tool for aiding understanding of the inherent dysfunction of criminal punishment processes, even those that supposedly aim to improve unjust social conditions. Abolition is being practiced in impactful ways in communities all over the country, and all over the world, providing examples that demonstrate it is possible to render current the criminal punishment system obsolete by working to build up systems of accountability, harm and conflict resolution, healing, reparations, self-determination, liberation, safety, justice, and true community. The autonomy of many of the communities implementing these practices show that not only is it possible to achieve safety, justice, and equity without state intervention, but that such conditions are necessary in some cases to achieve these things. The fact that so much work lies ahead need not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle, but a chance to engage ourselves creatively and courageously in navigating this messy territory of committing to abolitionist, transformative principles and values in a larger societal context that operates according to opposite values and principles. The normative component of an abolitionist philosophy reminds us that it is okay to make mistakes, as long as we are willing to learn from them, that these are inevitable processes in this massive, generative, expansive project of simultaneous social-structural, as well as individual, internal spiritual change and growth that can only continue to expand our horizons and take us to better places, collectively, and individually.

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