

ABOLITION.

FEMINISM.

NOW.

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I.

Abolition.

When the New York Women's House of Detention opened in 1932, it was heralded as a national model, an important example of "modern penology." Located in Greenwich Village where Sixth Avenue, Tenth Street, and Greenwich Avenue intersect, and constructed at a cost of two million dollars, this new prison was designed to address the increasing number of women entering the criminal legal system. News coverage emphasized a pivotal shift in the official vocabulary, mandating that the women incarcerated there be referred to as "inmates" instead of "prisoners," thus marking what were considered at the time to be significant reforms. The Women's House of Detention was also praised for its incorporation of emergent "scientific research," particularly the practice of carceral isolation as a response to the assumption that one of the "leading causes of crime" was the "ease with which young offenders become influenced by older law-breakers in prison." In what has become a familiar echo, building an "innovative" new prison in line with the "best" emerging science was framed as the necessary and most developed idea of reform.¹

Yet despite the prison's goal of isolation, its nearness to the street and to the core of the city created tangible pathways for communication and exchange. Visitations by people inhabiting the "free world" were not always confined to officially sanctioned meetings inside the prison via telephone and through the small and eventually degraded plexiglass panes, which required both parties to remain standing for the duration of the visit. There were also

decidedly unsanctioned street visits during which people screamed up from Greenwich Avenue calling upon anyone inside who happened to be listening to ask the person they wanted to visit to come to her window. Audre Lorde described this communication strategy in 1982:

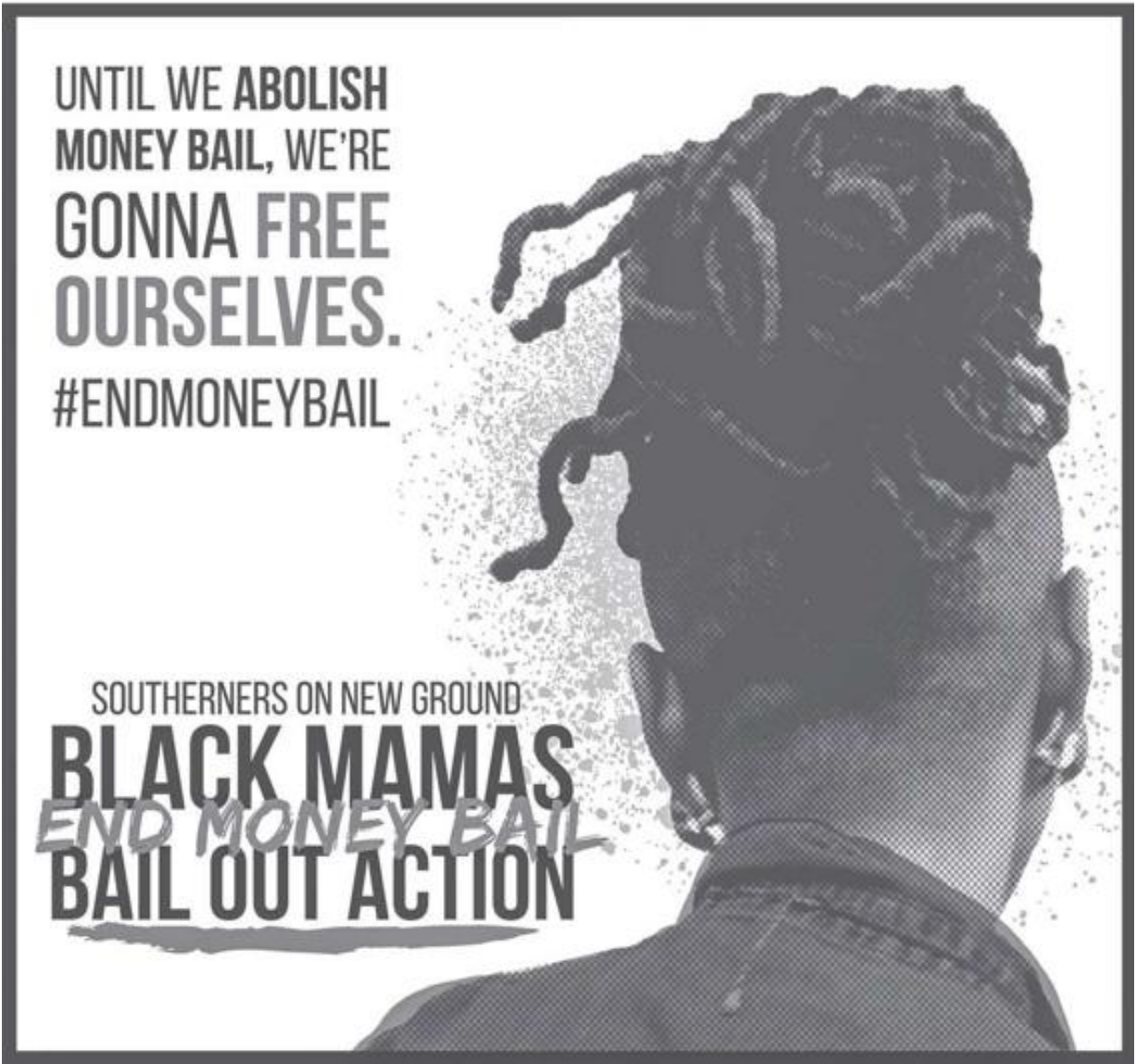
Information and endearments flew up and down, the conversants apparently oblivious to the ears of the passersby as they discussed the availability of lawyers, the length of stay, family, conditions, and the undying quality of true love. The Women's House of Detention, right smack in the middle of the Village, always felt like one up for our side—a defiant pocket of female resistance, ever-present as a reminder of possibility, as well as punishment.²

Because its proximity to the street provided access to communication that was unregulated and to a great extent un surveilled by the prison, it also created conduits for organizing. However temporal and fractured, inside and outside organizers found ways to interrupt and destabilize the prison's regimes of isolation. In 1969, during the days between Christmas and the new year, the emergent Gay Liberation Front protested for twenty-four hours a day in front of the prison in response to the incarceration of Afeni Shakur and Joan Bird—two Black Panthers whose cases attracted substantial media attention.

During the time Angela Davis spent in the House of D., as it was nicknamed, supporters helped to organize a bail campaign that was coordinated in part through this unregulated communication between the incarcerated and the streets. Prefiguring the Black Mamas Bail Out Action campaign initiated in 2017 by Mary Hooks of Southerners on New Ground (SONG), those on the outside raised money for bail, and women on the inside collectively decided who would benefit from the bail campaign.³ There were women who spent many months behind bars even though their charges were relatively minor, because they and their family members outside had few or no resources. From their perspective, a bail set at \$500 might as well have been \$500,000. The organizing and collective decision-making

among the imprisoned women was especially important because those who got out on bail committed to raising funds for the bail campaign after their release. While the mission of isolation was supported by what was presented as scientific evidence, literally concretizing the “modern” penology that the House of D. symbolized, the history of this institution was also always characterized by resistance.

The collective practices established by people inside and outside of the House of D. emerged from the tools and resources at hand—voices, people, money raised. While not explicitly named as abolitionist or often even as feminist, these collective practices are nevertheless important elements in the genealogy of abolition feminism. While bail funds had been created for political prisoners like H. Rap Brown, most incarcerated people did not have access to these networks. However, as far as we can determine, the campaign at the House of D. was one of the earliest instances of bail campaigns for people with no public profile—like the contemporary Black Mamas Bail Out Action and the emergence of grassroots bail bond funds across the United States.⁴ The establishment of bail funds, the communication networks developed from shouting up to cell windows from the street, and the willful and collective refusal by those inside and outside to acquiesce in the isolation enacted by the prison constituted a powerful early abolition feminist intervention. Current efforts to abolish bail altogether—such as the 2020 announcement by San Francisco district attorney Chesa Boudin that his office was terminating cash bail—owe a great deal to these earlier abolition feminist efforts.



Black Mamas Bail Out Action image designed by Micky Jordan for Mother's Day in 2019.

In 1974, the population of the Women's House of Detention was moved to Rikers Island prison. The House of D. was demolished. Joan Nestle suggests that imprisoned women's persistent interruptions to the daily life of Greenwich Village streets, considered "bad for real estate and tourism," eventually prompted the mayor to close the prison.⁵ After significant organizing, a garden was created on the former site of the House of D. These rich organizing histories have been largely scrubbed from abolitionist movement histories. Yet the emptiness of the 1932 argument for modern penology echoes in

contemporary calls to create so-called kinder, nicer jails across the US, particularly in New York City, during struggles over an alternative plan to the now-delegitimized Rikers Island prison.

San Francisco, Denver, Bellingham, Los Angeles, and many other cities and counties are organizing against and sometimes successfully defeating proposed new jail (and prison) constructions, expansions, and associated financing schemes. Inconceivable to many even ten years ago, jail closure, the elimination of money bond, clemency, and “compassionate release” are now debated in mainstream media outlets such as the *Washington Post* and lauded in progressive public policy forums as examples of necessary change. These ideological and material shifts represent enormous gains. Yet an abolition feminist lens teaches us that our work is not simply about “winning” specific campaigns but reframing the terrain upon which struggle for freedom happens. Indeed, one of the fundamental precepts of abolition is that winning a campaign is not the only measure of success: *how* we struggle, how our work enables future struggles, and how we stay clear about what we are fighting for matters. Working from this snapshot of the generative analysis and histories of people organizing for liberation around and within the House of D., this chapter offers one pathway for thinking about how abolitionist practice was shaped by feminism. Incorporating the organizational formation of Critical Resistance and other networks that built contemporary abolitionist movements, the influence of the historical insights of W. E. B. Du Bois, and analysis from contemporary campaigns, this chapter traces the feminist throughlines propelling abolitionist practice. Today, as always, it is crucial to highlight these forms of organizing in a genealogy of abolition and feminism.

Organizing Genealogies

Three years before the demolition of the House of D., the Attica Brothers issued in 1971 a passionate call for abolition during the four-day rebellion that echoed across various movements and activist circles.⁶ In the wake of the Attica uprising, numerous

examples of the beginnings of a counterhegemonic discourse surfaced—such as the uprising at Walpole Prison in Massachusetts where incarcerated people organized a labor union in a prison and ran the prison⁷—even as this momentum was unfortunately soon hindered by the reigning law-and-order rhetoric. The American Friends Service Committee published *Struggle for Justice: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America*. The concluding section of this report emphasized, among other issues, “opposition to the construction of new prisons.” The report argued that

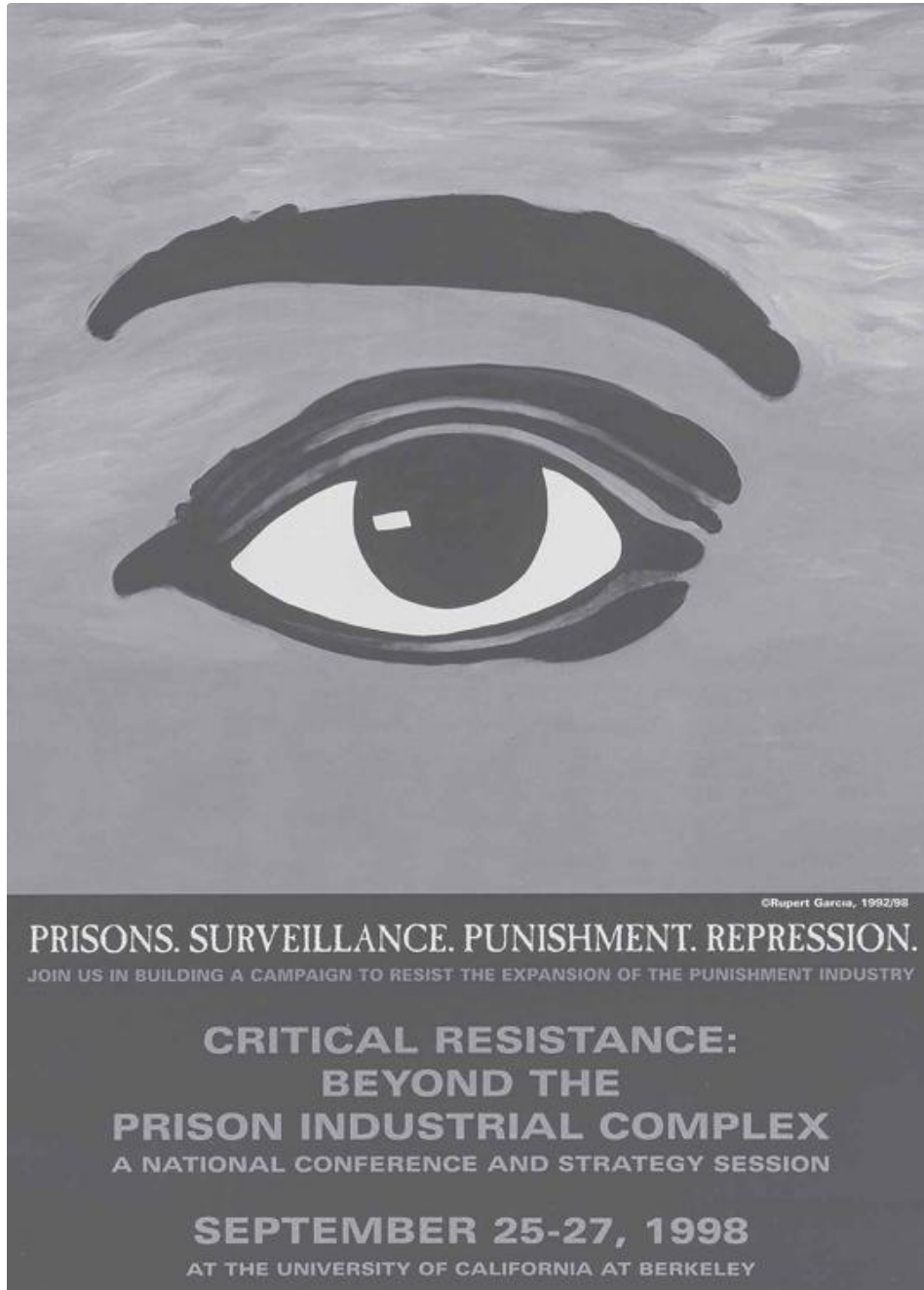
As a reform, “modern” prisons may relieve the harsher physical hardships of doing time, but the essential punitive element of prison—deprivation of liberty and free choice—remains. When pressures for reform lead to demands to relieve “overcrowding” by adding new cell or bed space, the result is inevitable: the coercive net of the justice system will be spread over a larger number of people, entrapping them for longer periods of time. If prisons are overcrowded, ways should be found to cut back the mass of criminal laws and the types of enforcement that send so many people to prison. The construction of new prisons is not compatible with our view of the proper role of criminal law in a democratic society.⁸

The 1976 handbook for abolitionists *Instead of Prisons* likewise clearly outlined strategies for decarceration and documented an abbreviated history of abolitionist analysis with more than a century of citations from incarcerated and free individuals and organizations. The handbook cited Judge Bruce M. Wright, who eventually served on the New York State Supreme Court, and who visited Greenhaven Prison in 1975: “For years I have condemned the prisons of America. I have always said that the prison system as it exists in America today, should be abolished. As I have grown older, I have seen no reason to change that view.”⁹ *Instead of Prisons* was coauthored by the Quaker activist Fay Honey Knopp, a groundbreaking twentieth-century abolitionist, who later argued that abolition was a significant dimension of radical feminism.¹⁰

These ideas were taken up in the 1970s by the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project, which worked to create a vibrant community of people inside and outside prisons along the West Coast by hosting discussions on "alternatives to prison," circulating newsletters with shared updates and analysis, creating support networks for people inside and after release, and generating sustained campaigns to halt construction of new jails and prisons.¹¹ These contributions to the counterhegemonic discourse that emerged after Attica reveal a necessary core of abolition feminism already present in past efforts.

Abolitionist ideas about democracy, freedom, safety, and justice continued to percolate throughout the following decades, even as demands for substantive reform gave way to calls for increasingly punitive strategies often couched in the very reforms designed to render incarceration more humane. Almost twenty-five years after the demolition of the House of D., when the establishment of these early, site-specific forms of resistance—including grassroots bail funds—were largely forgotten, abolition as an idea was revived by the 1998 conference "Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex." Drawing from earlier lineages, this convening offered abolitionism as a twenty-first-century strategy for addressing not only the staggering rise in the numbers of incarcerated people in the US but also increasingly in Europe, Australia, Africa, and South America. In the fall of 1996, Cassandra Shaylor, then a graduate student in History of Consciousness at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) and an attorney for incarcerated women, and Angela Davis, faculty member in that department, first discussed the possibility of organizing a conference that would bring people together to develop radical anti-prison organizing strategies.¹² In order to avoid exceptionalizing those who could not afford to pay, admission to the conference was free, and additional funds were raised to support travel for formerly incarcerated people. It is worth noting that of the twenty-eight members of the organizing committee, all except five were women or nonbinary. Originally, organizers of the conference assumed that they were being optimistic in their expectations that several hundred activists from around the country could be persuaded to attend. However, by the time the actual conference

took place in September 1998 at the University of California, Berkeley, some 3,500 were in attendance.



Poster featuring artwork by Rupert Garcia, created for the 1998 Critical Resistance conference.

This gathering marked the beginning of an entirely new phase of anti-prison activism. It consolidated a major organizing presence, highlighting abolitionist approaches in cities like Oakland, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Portland that involved such work as systematically challenging the construction of new prisons and promoting decarceration strategies. The group worked with educators to develop campaigns around such demands as “schools not jails” and “education not incarceration.” Two-and-a-half years later, in May 2001, Critical Resistance was established as a national organization with Rose Braz as the campaign and media director. Today, after more than two decades of protests, campaigns, advocacy, and movement building, Critical Resistance has not only helped to direct public attention toward the prison crisis but also mobilized a wide swath of organizers who shifted the discourse away from liberal demands for prison reform toward prison abolition, recognizing that the same logic applies to structures of policing and other carceral formations. As a key moment in the history and genealogy of abolition, the convening marked the beginning of a movement philosophically anchored by the notion of abolition with strong feminist inflections.

The CR conference created a pathway for multiple other gatherings that propelled abolition. Some of these convenings—too many to chronicle—were singular events. For example, the 2007 conference “Transforming Justice: Ending the Criminalization and Imprisonment of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People” (organized and sponsored by the Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Critical Resistance, and other organizations) demonstrated why analyses of the prison industrial complex that failed to account for queer and trans resistance are incomplete and inadequate.¹³ Other gatherings became yearly opportunities for assessment integral to movement building: in March 2020, the tenth annual Beyond the Bars conference took place in New York, “Freedom Plans: Strategies for

Challenging a Carceral Society,” organized by a network of formerly incarcerated people, led by Kathy Boudin and Cheryl Wilkins. Yet other meetings shaped new organizations: in 2011 the abolitionist organization Students Against Mass Incarceration was founded at Howard University during the unfortunately unsuccessful campaign to save Troy Davis from the death penalty. After holding a national conference in 2013, drawing students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities like Morgan State, numerous campus-based campaigns emerged, such as the movement demanding divestment from private prisons.

Critical Resistance popularized radical analyses of the ways in which imprisonment and policing, firmly linked to developments in global capitalism, simultaneously incorporate and mask structural racism. This abolitionist movement sought to explain the tremendous increase in the numbers of imprisoned people during the 1980s in relation to the structural changes produced by the rise of global capitalism during that period. The deindustrialization of the US economy, which led to the elimination of vast numbers of jobs, especially in heavy manufacturing like steel, auto, and mining, had a devastating impact on Black communities in cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Because the rise of global capitalism also involved neoliberal strategies to disestablish services associated with the welfare state, unemployed people lost any vestiges of a safety net. Instead of directly addressing problems created by structural shifts in the economy, the stopgap “solution” of punishment consolidated the link between racism and criminalization.



Poster created for the Critical Resistance ten-year-anniversary conference in Oakland, California, in 2008 by Pete Railand.

This movement was also shaped by organizing, especially by Black feminists, that continued to illuminate the punishing power of state programs marked as welfare and other social services. The existing welfare program Aid to Families with Dependent Children was associated within popular discourse with Black women, even as the majority of recipients were white. The myth of the Black “welfare queen” created an easy target and was a pivotal discursive strategy that held women responsible for criminal behavior in both the

putative misuse of welfare funds and as generators of a culture of crime that would be largely perpetuated by their male children.¹⁴ As Dorothy Roberts documented in *Killing the Black Body*, first published in 1997, “A persistent objective of American social policy has been to monitor and restrain this ‘corrupting tendency’ of Black motherhood.”¹⁵ Although child and family services are often misconceived as “soft” forms of surveillance and policing, what Roberts has called the “family regulation system,” and more recently “the family policing system,” is directly weaponized against poor families, disproportionately Black and Indigenous women.¹⁶ Far from a “kind and just parent,” state intervention results in grotesque outcomes for families, particularly young folks.

What differentiates this explicitly abolitionist approach from prevailing ideas and scenarios addressing prison repression—both then and now—is the tenacious critique of prison reform and of criminal justice reform more broadly, as well as the recognition that the ideological impulse to contain all efforts to address the social damage wrought by prisons within the parameters of “reform” serves to further authorize incarceration as the legitimate and immutable foundation of justice. Abolitionist organizing recognized that there were no easy reformist solutions to the hegemonic notion that Indigenous and Black people, other people of color, poor people, trans people, and women of all racial backgrounds who do not conform to dominant gender expectations were naturally inclined to criminality and belong in prison. An amalgam of economic, political, cultural, and representational forces produces this fatal “normal.” Politicians were winning elections by exploiting the notion of law and order and perverting definitions of safety, media outlets were supporting these ideas for their own benefit, and corporations were profiting from services to prisons and cheap prison labor. The field of prison architecture was expanding, as telephone companies were developing lucrative contracts with correctional agencies, and as the construction industry itself was thriving as a result of the many jails and prisons being built. Moreover, gender violence was increasingly conceptualized as just another crime to be addressed within the law-and-order framework by an emerging victims’ rights movement supported by conservative legislators. The same conditions that

were responsible for the economic/racial issues that drove the prison boom in the US were also responsible for ruining local economies in the Global South, and therefore driving increased migration—particularly to the US—especially from areas of the world subject to structural adjustment according to the demands of international finance capital. Immigrant detention facilities, many of them owned and operated by private prison companies, further consolidated strategies of what is now referred to as “mass incarceration.” Abolition’s reorientation and revitalization as a philosophical and activist tradition in the context of intensifying state violence made it possible to understand that mere reforms would not make visible or eliminate any of these structural conditions.

Because language has always been a central dimension of radical political movements, one of the explicit goals of Critical Resistance was to generate new vocabularies and new theoretical strategies that might propel scholars, artists, advocates, and organizers toward bolder critical engagements with prevailing ideologies of law and order. Two of the key terms Critical Resistance offered to the movement were “prison industrial complex” and “abolition.” Both concepts were designed to eschew reformist solutions to the problem of the soaring prison population. In 1995, urban theorist Mike Davis described the California economy as moving from agribusiness toward a prison industrial complex.¹⁷ Critical Resistance formally defined the prison industrial complex, or PIC, as “the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems.”¹⁸ The introduction of the concept of the prison industrial complex enabled an analysis of the prison construction boom of the 1980s and 1990s and the attendant rise in the prison population that could dispense with the naturalized assumption that those who were in prison were there simply because they had committed crimes. Based on the recognition that the use of the term *military industrial complex*, ironically introduced by then president Eisenhower as he was leaving office, helped to boost the antiwar movement during the Vietnam era, it was hoped that the related term *prison industrial complex* might also indicate a

deeper analysis of the relationship between prison expansion and the political economy of racial capitalism.¹⁹

During this formative period of resistance, abolitionist organizers insisted on a geopolitically capacious understanding of the prison industrial complex, which, in many ways, reflected a complex feminist engagement with the relations that constitute the PIC. The preponderantly male populations of jails and prisons did not give license to dismiss gender as an important analytical category. Moreover, precisely because the PIC was conceptualized as a set of relations beyond the process of incarceration—economic, political, legal, social—it propelled activists and researchers to recognize the educational system as well as child and family services and other social service systems as domains of deeply gendered, ableist, and racialized punishment. With respect to incarceration, focusing on women’s experiences of punishment also eventually helped clarify the relationships between state violence and intimate violence and to elucidate how prisons reproduce forms of violence that proliferate in the “free world.”

In insisting on feminist approaches to understanding imprisonment, Critical Resistance conference organizers built on the work of coalitions of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women to undo the notion that women were less subject to state violence because of their relatively small numbers behind bars and thus could be ignored in our efforts to understand the nature of the prison crisis. Even though women constituted a minority of people behind bars, they clearly bore the burden of criminalization and imprisonment: women have always been the major supporters of those in prison not only as organizers, but also as anchors of families and kinship networks deeply affected by incarceration practices. This is especially true of women of color. These feminist insights were directly incorporated into the structure of the 1998 Critical Resistance conference. The organizing committee spent many hours deliberating on the ways in which feminist methodologies could enhance various analyses and organizing approaches. The visible leadership of feminist activists and scholars, both in planning the conference and during the event itself, signaled that a powerful

abolitionist framework required an antiracist, anticapitalist feminist practice.

Related to this insistence on feminist analytical visibility and organizing methods was the imperative to vigorously challenge ideological assumptions that often accompany and seriously pollute anti-prison work and other organizing efforts that take up existing forms of oppression—from civil rights to farmworker struggles. Entering such work has frequently entailed the implicit creation of hierarchical relations that objectify the people for whom one is working as in need of charitable assistance. This missionary position implicitly defines the beneficiaries as inferior and the benefactors as superior in relationships that are structured in such a way as to render egalitarian sociality impossible.²⁰ In other words, people in prison always remain “inmates” or “prisoners,” just as women who experience gender violence are relegated to the status of “victims” and their advocates and helpers become categorically more capable than the objects of their charity. Prison reform movements, like anti-violence groups, even the most effective ones, have been especially susceptible to the creation of such ideologically structured relationships. As a result, people in prison (including survivors of gender and state violence) are rarely acknowledged as subjects capable of understanding and transforming their own conditions. Precisely to avoid this “charity” syndrome, Critical Resistance organizers (a group that included formerly incarcerated people) insisted that people in prison be directly involved at every level, including in the program of the conference itself. This call for inclusiveness, along with other organizing principles, reflected a feminism that was not narrowly linked to gender. Formerly and currently incarcerated people were invited to participate in as many panels as possible, even as this posed technological problems, such as installing telephone lines that permitted people behind bars to make collect calls to the conference venue. Because people in prison had generated much of the knowledge that enabled the formation of this movement to abolish imprisonment, such a conference would be seriously lacking without their direct participation.

In popularizing the framework of the prison industrial complex and developing an abolitionist critique of the punishment strategies of bourgeois democracy, abolitionists have always gestured toward a very different conception of justice. The existing criminal legal system assumes that justice is retributive, or that punishment is the very essence of justice, and naturalizes the assumption that the only way balance can be re-created in the aftermath of harm is by proportional punishment. Critics of retributive justice point to the way that vengeance, not justice, seems to drive the process. Abolition urges us to move away from myopic and individualistic conceits and to focus instead on how particular cases embody and reflect broader concerns and reveal greater threats to safety and freedom than would be evident when viewed in isolation from larger social contexts. An abolitionist analysis moves beyond the literal incarceration of bodies deemed disposable to a broader set of cruel constraints that incapacitate and police whole communities.

To generate wide-ranging conversations about the prison industrial complex, abolitionists, borrowing from cultural theorist Stuart Hall, effected a “disarticulation” of crime and punishment.²¹ Popular discourses on the prison most frequently assumed that punishment existed in a causal relationship to crime, as implied by the adage “Don’t do the crime, if you can’t do the time.” Transforming public opinion regarding the reason for soaring numbers of people in prison required convincing enough people that crime was not the unqualified cause of punishment. This process of disarticulating crime and punishment created an opportunity to engage in a politics of rearticulation to counter the notion that prison was simply the appropriate sequel for the commission of crimes with the recognition that there are many reasons people end up behind bars and many needs experienced by those who are harmed.

Central to this process of rearticulation was the recognition that race, gender, class, and sexuality were more important determinants of who goes to prison than simply the commission of a crime. In fact, the current activist practice of referring to people in prison—and this is especially true of women, both cisgender and trans—as “criminalized” rather than “criminal” helps us to understand the dangerous ideological work that the prison and the criminal legal

system performs. This abolitionist and feminist attention to language and power is reflected in Eddie Ellis's "Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language," published in 2007:

(W)hen we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders, and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners, and felons—all terms devoid of humanness, which identify us as "things" rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the "official" language of the media, law enforcement, prison industrial complex, and public policy agencies. *However, they are no longer acceptable for us, and we are asking people to stop using them.*

In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to simply refer to us as **PEOPLE**. People currently or formerly incarcerated, **PEOPLE** on parole, **PEOPLE** recently released from prison, **PEOPLE** in prison, **PEOPLE** with criminal convictions, but **PEOPLE**.²²

This need to shift the language related to people with experiences of incarceration was also discussed and formalized in 1989 when the National Network for Women in Prison held the Fourth National Roundtable on Women in Prison in the San Francisco Bay Area, but little documentation remains of this discussion and its wide-ranging impact, a problem faced by many small organizing networks. Some documentation *does* remain—posters of convenings (but often not detailed minutes), snapshots of people gathered (but rarely lengthy summaries of the debates and discussions), images of people at actions (but not recordings of the planning meetings that shaped these strategies). The grammar and the genealogy of abolition and feminism thus sometimes rely on visual fragments and artifacts, highlighting the importance of recovering moments in abolition's past that might illuminate abolition feminist futures.

Writing with history also reveals the way in which abolitionism has always unfolded within an international context.²³ Global capitalism,

financial strategies associated with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and neoliberal scenarios that define poverty as individual rather than social, travel around the world alongside the exportation of carceral ideologies and strategies. Organizing the conference created opportunities to connect with anti-carceral efforts in Australia, Europe, the Middle East (especially Palestine), and South America. In the aftermath, Critical Resistance activists began to cultivate connections with campaigns in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and other parts of the world.

These internationalist relations offered new ways of building interventions at the intersection of feminism and abolition. In Queensland, Australia, the organization Sisters Inside, founded by Debbie Kilroy and Anne Warner in 1992, eventually began to center abolition as the most effective solution to the incarceration of aboriginal women. They shared their organizational structure, which insists on the inclusion of currently incarcerated women in leadership, with activists outside Australia.²⁴ Concurrently, the Elizabeth Fry Societies across Canada—historically a traditional charitable organization supporting women impacted by the criminal legal system—gradually adopted an abolitionist lens, centering organizing for decarceration, under the leadership of current Canadian senator Kim Pate.²⁵

Political prisoners in Turkey—Kurdish people and their allies—began to protest the institution of US-style prisons, called “F-type cells” there, by engaging in prolonged hunger strikes or death fasts. Women leaders—central to this struggle—brought a feminist analysis to the forefront of these actions. The fact that they specifically targeted forms of incarceration developed and promoted by the US meant that US anti-prison activists should pay much more attention to the global dimension of the prison industrial complex. Moreover, because feminist challenges to gender violence and socialist feminist analyses are at the core of the ongoing Kurdish struggle for democracy, there are crucial lessons regarding abolitionist futures to be learned.²⁶

Abolition, as a tradition, a philosophy, and a theory of change, moves away from a myopic focus on the distinct institution of the prison toward a more expansive vision of the social, political, and

economic processes that defined the context within which imprisonment came to be viewed as the legitimate hand of justice. As a “practical organizing tool and a long-term goal,” abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.²⁷ As illustrated by the history of the prison and the police, reforms sold as “progressive” all too often function to mask expanding mandates, logics, and budget lines. Abolitionist movements require struggles about strategy and vision: what, for example, are the “non-reformist reforms” (to use the phrase coined by Marxist theorist André Gorz and employed by Thomas Mathiesen in his *Politics of Abolition*) that make sustainable and material differences in the lives of people living under the control of oppressive systems?²⁸

Despite the long historical development of an abolition feminist framework that is both revolutionary and internationalist, mainstream interpretations of this contemporary movement have often narrowly focused on negation or absence—what abolitionists aim to remove or dismantle. In a December 2020 interview, former president Barack Obama offered a familiar critique: “Snappy slogans” such as “defund the police” are damaging. He stated: “You lost a big audience the minute you say it, which makes it a lot less likely that you’re actually going to get the changes you want done.” What is obfuscated by this sentiment are the immense gains and ruptures offered by the language of social and political movements. As our reliance on one critical genealogy of abolition indicates, abolition has always been as much about the work that focuses on building and experimenting as it has on what must be dismantled. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has pointed out, “Abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions.”²⁹

Building has always been central, particularly for those working at the intersection of feminism and abolition. For example, as feminists recognize the pervasiveness of gender and sexual violence, the work cannot be only to defund police, as this will not address harm endemic to communities. Abolition feminism has always required a practice, an engagement—preventative community-based responses that can be implemented to both reduce the incidence of gender and

sexual violence and address harm when it does happen, without calling the police. By definition, this requires revisioning, experimentation, and engagement, not simply the absence or removal of police or prisons.



Free Our Queens, made by Melanie Cervantes and the Women In Reentry Fellows at the People's Paper Co-op to raise money for the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund, 2020.

Crucial Antecedents

Abolitionist as adjective and identity in the contemporary moment draws profoundly on the nineteenth century as inspiration. Just as racial slavery was a target of abolition then, a retributive and punishment-focused criminal legal system that has always been structurally inclined toward racist violence is the focus of abolition now. Abolition has also been compared by some to the use of the term *revolution*—amorphous, shapeshifting, defined only through use. A range of activists, scholars, and public figures mobilize it to describe a wide spectrum of work, including work designed to

address the era of racial mass incarceration without putting to rest the entirety of the criminal legal system. While abolition has become a twenty-first-century term defining the standpoint of many radical activists involved in global justice movements, we can learn from a close reading of its use in the nineteenth century.

Organizers at the turn of this century understood how difficult it would be to attempt to move away from a prison system that had been made to appear natural and permanent, just as putting an end to the system of transatlantic racial slavery once seemed an impossible political goal. Analogies to the abolition of racial slavery have taken root in prison abolitionist circles, even or perhaps especially in the narrower approaches to ending mass incarceration, or in studies of the social death of slavery and the civil death of imprisonment.³⁰ We attempt here to distinguish between a purely analogical relation between slavery and imprisonment and one that acknowledges a genealogical connection between the two institutions. It is within the context of highlighting the historical influence of the system of slavery—with its violent and racialized punishments manifested in the development of the convict lease system and the post-slavery penitentiary system of the South—that we trace the past convergences of abolition and feminism within the antislavery movement. White women, for example, developed a consciousness of their own collective predicament by comparing the institution of marriage to slavery without attending to the violences perpetuated by their own actions and inactions. Moreover, we may want to consider that the very term *feminism*, an anglicization of the French *feminisme*, has its origin within the tradition of utopianism associated with Charles Fourier, who interpreted the social condition of women as a form of slavery.³¹ There are some aspects of the relationship between the antislavery and anti-prison movements and the political moments in which they occurred that have yet to be brought into a conversation that acknowledges the pitfalls and potential of feminism.

Of the many inspirations for the work of abolitionists today, one of the most important is a text that circulated widely among lay scholars and thinkers affiliated with the Black movement before it became part of the academic canon in the 1980s. W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black*

Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880 was published in 1935, a moment of social and political reckoning much like the one we are experiencing today.³² Written when there was an opening to new possibilities in the wake of capitalist crisis, Du Bois's volume on the history of post-slavery Radical Reconstruction and its demise not only reframed the period by centralizing Black agency in the making of a new democracy but also invited his contemporary readers to observe the crushing counterrevolutionary force of the property-holding elites. He argued that enslaved persons and free Black subjects were instrumental in the abolition of slavery, that slavery was indeed the cause of the Civil War, and that Reconstruction was more than a negation of slavery (and therefore was perceived as a threat by white property holders). His analysis offers a challenge both *to* historians of the period and *for* the present in which he wrote. These arguments also forecast the following contemporary abolitionist approaches: 1) taking leadership from those who are most directly impacted, so that the work incorporates the perspectives of the system's direct targets and not simply their more comfortably situated defenders; 2) calling for dismantling institutions that are overtly causing social and civil death; 3) broadening the liberatory agenda to include apparatuses of oppression beyond those that are specifically understood to be carceral; and 4) linking contemporary abolition praxis—or theory plus action and reflection—to questions of racial capitalism.

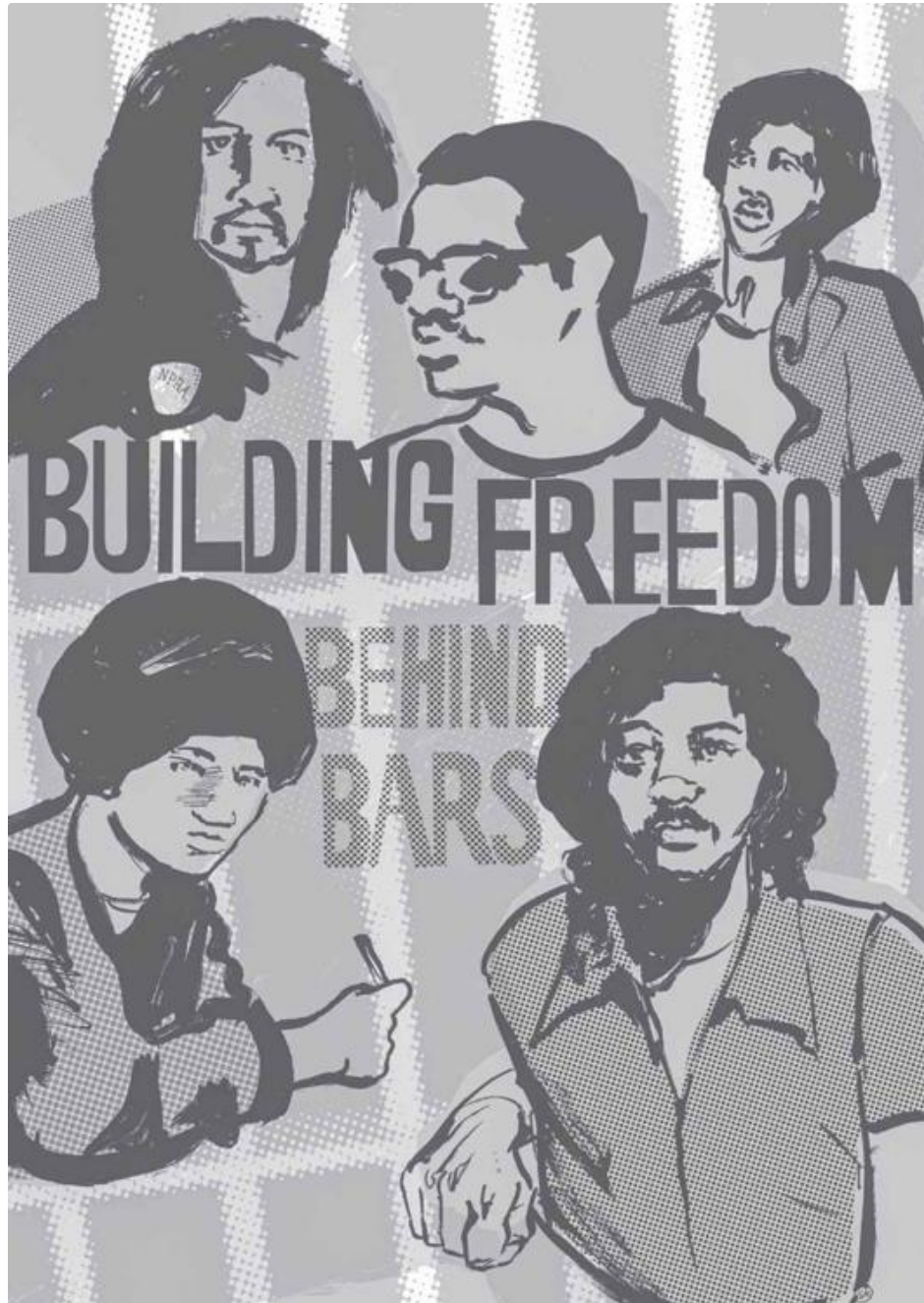
Du Bois not only prefigured the term racial capitalism—the idea that capitalism cannot be understood outside of a relationship to power and race—but, with an internationalist lens, he also insisted that abolition was always hinged to challenging capitalism. Toward the end of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois reflects on damage wrought by the spread of capitalism in the aftermath of slavery, which became especially apparent with the eruption of World War I: “The world wept and still is weeping and blind with tears and blood. For there began to rise in America in 1876 a new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor.”³³ The war laid bare what Du Bois described as

grotesque Profits and Poverty, Plenty and Starvation, Empire and Democracy, staring at each other across World Depression. And the rebuilding, whether it comes now or a century later, will and must go back to the basic principles of Reconstruction in the United States during 1867–1876—Land, Light and Leading for slaves black, brown, yellow, and white, under a dictatorship of the proletariat.³⁴

A Depression-era text infused with the vision of what Du Bois referred to as “abolition democracy,” *Black Reconstruction* was conceptualized as a history of the present, and more specifically a description of the historical developments that had produced the Jim Crow era.

Despite its necessary focus on humanizing the Black subjects who abolished slavery in remaking democracy, Du Bois’s work still challenges prevailing assumptions about the project and the discipline of history. The theory of history he animates relied neither on teleology—the idea that human history would inevitably lead toward social improvement—nor on theology; it suggested instead that the arc of the moral universe does not necessarily bend toward justice. Reconstructing democracy required the labor and sacrifice of many, and the study of its suppression did not simply target southern planters and those who had owned slaves but also the northern capitalists who joined with them to consolidate the property interest in whiteness.³⁵

From a collective reading of *Black Reconstruction*, we are led to reexamine the post–civil rights era, an era in which the dramatic rightward turn of the prison-building period bears a relationship to the demise of Radical Reconstruction. That relationship has been described analogically, as a period that is something like this one, leading Rev. William Barber, for example, in 2013 to call for a Third Reconstruction that would build on the first one in the nineteenth century and the second one in the twentieth (the modern civil rights era).



Poster created in 2010 by Alexander Dwinell and Sanya Hyland commemorating the 1973 Walpole Prison uprising.

Radical Reconstructions, Not Liberal Reforms

Contemporary abolition feminists are pursuing a Radical Reconstruction. Prison abolitionists and scholars have been inspired by Du Bois's revised perspective, as well as the need to move from a narrow focus on cages and armed humans to a larger emancipatory vision encompassing all aspects of society. It was partly *Black Reconstruction* that allowed us to begin to see incarceration as on a continuum with racial slavery rather than belonging to a new and separate era of freedom. It is not enough to release people from chains. Just as Du Bois challenged the notion that slavery could be expunged as a discrete institution, leaving intact existing political and economic frameworks, abolitionists today call into question the prevailing assumption that mass incarceration can be effectively addressed without analyzing the root causes of injustice and the impact of other systems of oppression, including, in the first place, global capitalism. The overarching question posed by contemporary abolitionists: What would we have to change in our existing societies in order to render them less dependent on the putative security associated with carceral approaches to justice? is a reformulation of a central question posed by Du Bois. Du Bois asked how society can be reshaped to incorporate formerly enslaved people, providing them with access to land, education, and political power. Just as former slaves needed land or economic power, education or intellectual power, and representation in government or political power, incarcerated communities will be released from the hold of carcerality only by acquiring access to economic, intellectual, and political power. This framework resonates for abolition feminists because to render prisons and policing obsolete we must also build movements demanding that society be reshaped with the goal of eliminating gender and sexual violence and their enabling of racist and heteropatriarchal structures.

Because the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution condoned the enslavement of persons lawfully convicted of criminal acts, contemporary criminal legal movements persistently center an analogy: slavery on a different scale is linked to the project and regime of the prison. Analogies can be helpful. *Prison Legal News* editor Paul Wright wrote in a 1998 article entitled “Slaves of the State” that “the effect of the Thirteenth Amendment was not to abolish slavery but to limit it to those who had been convicted of a crime.”³⁶ The idea that imprisoned persons are “slaves of the state” circulated among Black people in prison long before scholar-activists began to probe the relation between slavery and the contemporary punishment system in the United States. This notion helped to generate important movements in prisons, especially those calling for union wages and benefits for workers in prisons. This analogy continues to surface with effect: in Ava DuVernay’s film *13th*, Bryan Stevenson states that there are currently more Black men in prison than there were Black men enslaved in 1850, a point also emphatically made in Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*.³⁷

The revelatory value of this statistical drama notwithstanding, historical methods that are overly reliant on analogical reasoning (that something is like something else) can often be misleading.³⁸ Relying on analogies often erases the imperative to do analytical work that might be more effectively accomplished by establishing a genealogical relation between the institution of slavery and the institution of the prison. Robert Perkinson’s *Texas Tough: The Rise of America’s Prison Empire* explores the way regimes and punishments associated with slavery made their way into the post-Civil War penitentiary system in Texas (and other southern states), thus problematizing the widespread assumption that penitentiaries in Pennsylvania and New York constituted the only important paradigms in US prison history.³⁹

Complicating this landscape, the terms “slavery,” “modern slavery,” and “abolition” are deployed in contemporary movements that argue for *increased* investments in carcerality specifically to curtail trafficking—particularly sex trafficking—and sex work. For example, one global anti-sex trafficking organization, Polaris “is named for the North Star, which people held in slavery in the United States used as

a guide to navigate their way to freedom.”⁴⁰ This is further convoluted, as often campaigns and legislation that purport to only eliminate sex trafficking—for example, in the US the 2018 FOSTA and SESTA laws (the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act)—are used to police and punish domestic sex work.⁴¹ We are therefore always careful to distinguish anti-prison and anti-police abolitionism from the deployment of the concept of abolitionism to target sex workers.

Beyond the slipperiness of analogies, the power of anti-prison organizing also propelled distorted conceptions into the mainstream. Without undermining the undeniable power and influence of texts such as Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and Ava DuVernay’s *13th* (which shares Alexander’s conceptualization of history), a close reading and viewing reveals that both the book and the film frame mass incarceration as a primarily US problem that emanates from the failure to comprehensively address the economic, political, and cultural consequences of the defunct system of chattel slavery inside the United States. While both Alexander and DuVernay associate themselves with current abolitionist discourses and recognize the importance of situating the analysis of the prison crisis within a global framework, those who do not share this broader vision have often interpreted both works to mean that the problem of racialized imprisonment will be solved by conventional and domestic civil rights activism—in other words, without necessarily disturbing larger, global frameworks of power such as capitalism and heteropatriarchy.

While the term “mass incarceration” played a significant role in awakening the public to the fact that the United States incarcerates more people—both absolutely and per capita—than any other country in the world, its usage as a concept in governmental circles, both progressive and conservative, has inevitably encouraged the assumption that the decarceration of specific populations is, by itself, an adequate response.⁴² Similarly, the use of the category of “innocence” is often invoked as an adequate measure of determining who gets released and who “deserves” to remain in prison. Official reactions assume that the problem of mass incarceration can be addressed by simply releasing a certain number of people from prison and that the problem of gender violence can be solved by

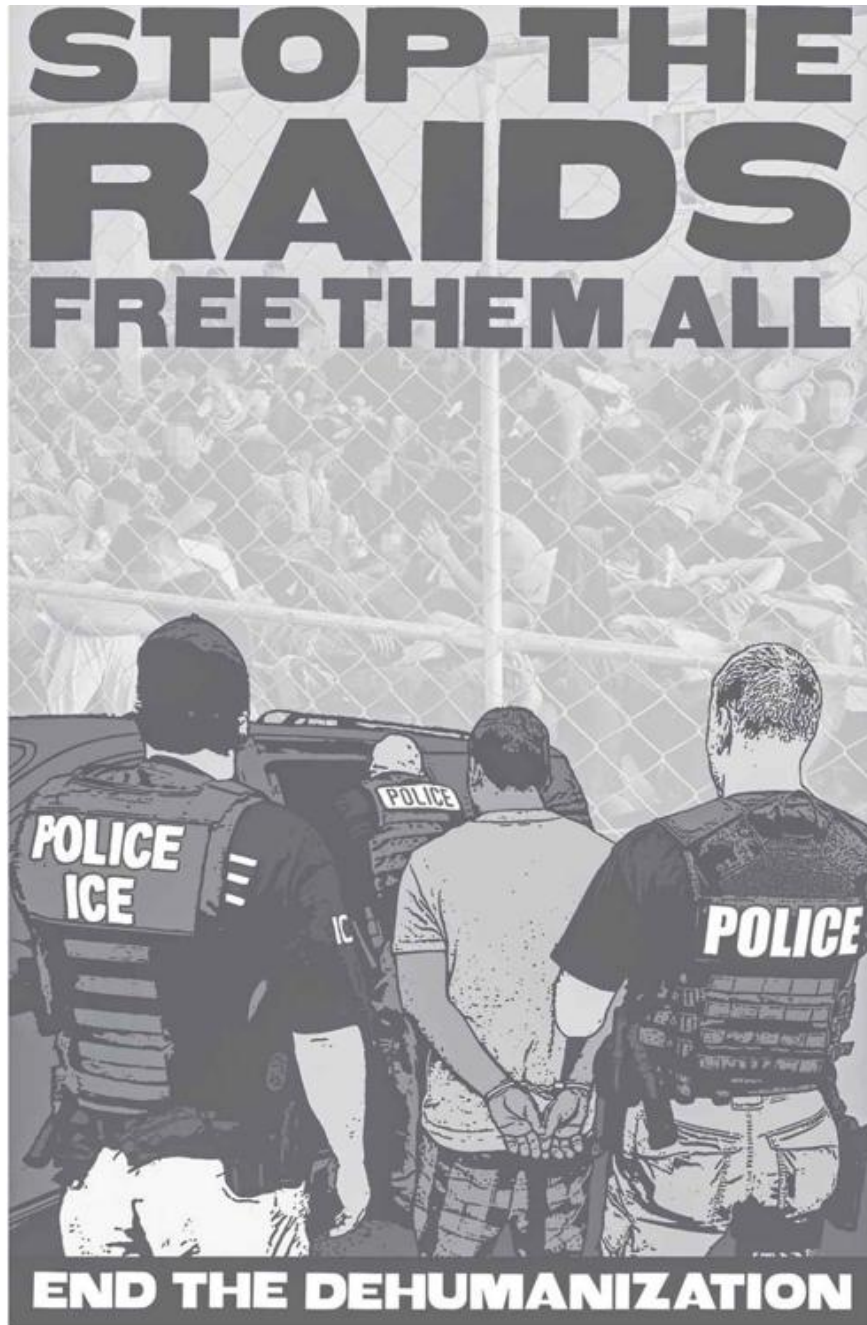
simply imprisoning individual perpetrators—especially prominent male figures. Yet the demonstrations and uprisings in the spring of 2020 with demands to defund the police demonstrated not only that many years of developing abolitionist organizing strategies were finally having a major impact but that reform pathways—for example federal legislation like the First Step Act, which opened up potential pathways for releasing a very limited number of people from the federal system—cannot even begin to address the structural character of carceral racism.

While galvanizing wider audiences, these analogies, concepts, and texts often propelled and naturalized reforms that did not disturb the conditions of structural racism responsible for the police abuse and incarceration of so many people of color. The First Step Act, as a salient example, was greeted with resounding ovations from both liberal and conservative circles when it was finally signed into US law at the end of 2018. Hailed as “the most significant criminal justice reform bill in decades,” some expressed the hope that it might serve as a step forward. Granted, a few more people in federal prisons were released earlier than previously expected, but the overall impact on the incarcerated population—on people in state prisons, county and city jails, jails in Indian Country, immigrant detention facilities, military prisons, as well as in federal prisons—will be minimal. The federal prison population of 181,000 consists of less than 10 percent of the total number of people behind bars in the United States. If the 2020 occupant of the office of the president had pardoned all those incarcerated in federal prisons, it would have simply decreased the country’s imprisoned population from 2.1 million to 1.9 million.⁴³

Legislation such as the First Step Act and its relatively minor measures have been embraced as important solutions to the problems included under the category of mass incarceration, which is unfortunately most often interpreted in isolation from police expansion, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, the expansion of public registries, the family policing system, and other dimensions of the prison industrial complex. The rich and extensive history of abolition feminism from the late twentieth century to the present militates against simplistic approaches to issues

related to prisons, police, and gender violence. It is therefore especially disheartening, although unsurprising, to abolition feminists to witness the overly simplified strategy designed to address the continuing crisis that has been named mass incarceration, and especially to consider that the most prominent mainstream approaches to gender and sexual violence rely precisely on carceral “solutions.” We know that the very history of the prison system has been one of putative reforms, which have carefully safeguarded the system itself from the kind of criticism that not only might have assisted in developing new strategies for addressing harm but also recognized that it is impossible to productively address modes of punishment without deep analyses of the socioeconomic and ideological factors that structure the societies that prisons purport to serve.

As abolitionist theory and practice demand a focus on structural forces, this attention cannot come to a standstill once we point out that these structural forces are deeply embedded in the prison industrial complex. What, for instance, is the relationship between the massive numbers of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people behind bars and the system of racial capitalism more broadly? The posing of such a question warns us about the pitfalls of assuming that racism is simply a given, and, by itself, a foundational explanatory concept needing no further examination. Such a truncated analytical sequence leads, for example, to the fallacious assumptions that what is often referred to as mass incarceration driven by racism is a peculiarly US phenomenon, even as we witness similar developments under the pressure of global capitalism in countries like South Africa, Colombia, and Brazil.



Poster created by Jesus Barraza of Dignidad Rebelde, 2020.

A myopic focus on the institution of the prison has protected the institution itself from abolitionist criticism. But it is not enough to focus on abolition in the narrow sense. Indeed, abolitionists have come to recognize that our advocacy must identify much more than the institution itself as the site for abolition. It is simply not possible to tear down prisons but leave everything else intact, including the structural racism that links the prison to the larger society or the heteropatriarchy and transphobia that fuels gender and sexual violence. This is the abiding message that Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* conveys to activist intellectuals in the twenty-first century, as prisons and policing continue to constitute the "afterlife of slavery."⁴⁴

Strategy: Care Not Cops

Abolition also demands that we answer to communities that want meaningful, affirming, and accessible services, including health care and housing, but not when these are annexed to punishment. Across the globe, abolitionist analysis and language emerged in a range of struggles in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Abolitionist campaigns against new jails or other forms of carceral expansion and criminal legal reform intersect with the material consequences of the state's abandonment of people with diverse needs. Delinking health care and mental health services—and so many other necessary flourishing life functions such as housing and education—from jailing and other facets of the carceral apparatus is crucial. This process of delinking represents an important principle of abolition, which is to challenge the migration of carcerality from brick-and-mortar jails and prisons to the places in everyday life where surveillance and punitive control dominate other aspects of the state's enterprise. Again, unsurprisingly, this careful work toward abolition—to parse punishment from authentic forms of care, to push

back on how the state absorbs the language of community-based demands for affirmation and support and deftly translates these into coercion and repression—has always been the labor of feminists who oppose racial capitalism. As contemporary struggles around carceral expansion increasingly morph into fights about services, including health care and housing, abolition feminism guides us to organize boldly and carefully. How struggle unfolds matters.

Directly linking jails and other carceral institutions to care and treatment widens the net of the carceral state. While some might identify incarceration as the first or only place they were able to find access to health care, this should neither be praised nor become policy. As many scholars and activists suggest, drug treatment programs and mental health services, particularly in an environment where most poor people do not have access to these resources untethered to punishment, are rarely liberatory or affirming. Kerwin Kaye's research on one reform often depicted as progressive—drug courts, or courts that offer supervised treatment as an alternative to prison sentences for some drug-related crimes—illustrates that not only do approximately 50 percent of people diverted to these courts “fail” in their treatment but in order to first participate, a person must plead guilty.⁴⁵ The 50 percent who “fail” must then serve the sentence attached to their original guilty plea, and they are unable to negotiate any plea arrangements. Far from “care” or treatment, Kaye illustrates that drug courts and mandated treatment programs are simply fresh forms of “therapeutic governance,” or new annexes to the prison industrial complex. Of course, unarticulated is that this “failure” does not trigger the program's or the treatment provider's accountability.

This fluid ability of the prison industrial complex to incorporate community demands for “care” and “treatment” is not novel. Disability organizers, addicts, youth activists, and particularly feminists have all recognized how vulnerability, in the form of needed care, protection, treatment, and a respect for difference, is weaponized by the carceral system.

Abolition as a forward-looking alternative to the conservative strategy of recurring yet ineffectual reforms has been enriched and deepened by theories and practices associated with the disability

movement. Just as the stigma of criminalization had to be seriously challenged to persuade people that struggles against incarceration constituted worthwhile social justice activism, so the disability rights movement has had to challenge the stigma of pathologization and likewise demonstrate that disability rights are essential to human rights, and thus occupy a central place on social justice agendas. While disability activists have long argued that disability itself is a social construct and have successfully protested the institutionalization of physically, psychiatrically, and intellectually disabled people, contemporary disability studies scholars have sought to link the struggle for prison abolition with deinstitutionalization.

In the most recent work of scholar-activist Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability*, she observes that “disability and madness are largely missing from analyses of incarceration and its resistance” and compellingly argues that prison abolitionists have a great deal to learn from the experience of deinstitutionalization. Challenging the prevalent assumption that deinstitutionalization of the public asylums helped to drive homelessness and the rise in incarceration, she writes:

deinstitutionalization did not lead to homelessness and increased incarceration. Racism and neoliberalism did, via privatization, budget cuts in all service/welfare sectors, and little to no funding for affordable and accessible housing and social services, while the budgets for corrections, policing, and punishment (of mostly poor people of color) skyrocketed.⁴⁶

Abolition feminism explicitly rejects state attempts to mobilize vulnerability and difference for the purpose of expanding carcerality and instead works to highlight the role of the state in perpetuating violence, demanding engagements that both support people who are most affected and address the root causes of incarceration—poverty, white supremacy, misogyny.

Reformist reforms vs. abolitionist steps to end IMPRISONMENT

This poster is a tool to assess and understand differences between reforms that strengthen incarceration and abolitionist steps that reduce its overall impact and grow other possibilities for wellbeing. As we work to dismantle incarceration in all its forms, we must resist common reforms that create or expand cages anywhere, including under the guise of "addressing needs" or "updated" replacements. Jails and prisons deprive communities of resources like medical and mental health care, transportation, food, and housing. In our fights, it is critical to uplift and strategically contribute to movements led by imprisoned people, both to address pressing conditions and for abolition. In all decarceration strategies, we must utilize tactics that will improve life for those most affected and make space to build the worlds we need.

DOES THIS...	reduce the number of people imprisoned, under surveillance, or under other forms of state control?	reduce the reach of jails, prisons, and surveillance in our everyday lives?	create resources and infrastructures that are steady, preventative, and accessible without police and prison guard contact?	strengthen capacities to prevent or address harm and create processes for community accountability?
Building jails or prisons to address overcrowding or rising numbers of "pre-trial" prisoners (for example, migrants)	NO. If they build it, they will fill it! Building more jails and prisons creates more cages, period!	NO. Building more jails and prisons increases the reach of the PIC and prison and jail infrastructures. Creating more cages means building something we have been down for.	NO. Adding cages takes away state and local funding and resources that could be directed to community-led infrastructures.	NO. Building more prisons and jails entrenches the current logic of accountability. They are sites that perpetuate violence and harm.
Building "alternatives to incarceration" or "re-entry" programs, "rehabilitation" alternatives to existing jails or prisons	NO. The history of the prison is a history of reform. New jails and prisons that are proposed as improvements on existing sites or buildings expand the arguments for and lengthen the life of imprisonment.	NO. There is no such thing as a "holistic" cage. Confinement under the pretense of addressing the needs that imprisonment reinforces the logic of using cages as a solution for social, economic, and political issues.	NO. Arguments for jails "close to home" reinforce the idea that jails and prisons create "safety" and take away the capacity to build resources that can create real being.	NO. Prisons and jails do not enable accountability. They are sites that perpetuate violence and harm, and exhibit oppressive social expectations around justice, sexuality, and mental health.
Building jails / programs that focus on "re-entry services" to address the needs of specific populations of people imprisoned	NO. Like all other carceral control, be provided in spaces of imprisonment. These "actions" do not decrease numbers of imprisoned people - they keep specific populations of people imprisoned.	NO. Building jails and prisons that lock up specific populations expands the reach of imprisonment by normalizing the idea that cars can and should be clogged with policing and imprisonment.	NO. The argument for these jails and prisons is that they provide specialized services through policing, imprisonment, and control. Environments of control and violence cannot provide care.	NO. Prisons and jails do not enable accountability. They are sites that perpetuate violence and harm, and exhibit oppressive social expectations around justice, sexuality, and mental health.
Legislation and other efforts to simply not create alternative programs as "reentry"	NO. This strategy entrenches the idea that anybody "deserves" or "needs" to be locked up. Prioritizing only some people for release builds cages.	NO. By doubling down on the "need" for some people to be locked up, these efforts strengthen and expand the reach of prisons, jails, and the PIC.	NO. Manufacturing divisions between imprisoned people, or more or less "deserving" locks, are able to create real supports and resources that sustain all people.	NO. These efforts reinforce the idea that some people are "due" to society and others "deserve another chance," strengthening logics of punishment without engaging the context of how harms happen.
Use of electronic monitoring (house arrest) and other law enforcement-led "innovations" in jails and prisons	NO. Electronic monitoring is a form of state control. It escalates the hegemony of control with the PIC for all members of a household, increasing the vulnerability of people already subject to policing and surveillance.	NO. Monitoring brings the prison, jail, or detention center into a person's home, turning it into a space of incarceration, which takes both a psychological and a financial toll.	NO. E-surveillance means that regular daily movements are constantly linked to threats of arrest. This does not allow people to build and maintain community.	NO. E-surveillance extends the violence and harm of imprisonment into people's homes and everyday lives. Nothing about electronic monitoring creates systems of accountability or healing.
Public / private "re-entry" or "rehabilitation" programs that regulate conditions of imprisonment	NO. These services move people from one locked facility into another facility when with similar rules and with the threat of jail or prison sentencing.	NO. This expands the reach of imprisonment by adding to the scope where. This is particularly the case where the production, maintenance and repair logic and rules of jails and prisons are required to continually challenge them.	NO. These programs require moving through the policing and "re-entry" systems to access any services that might be available there.	NO. Court monitored / police-run "re-entry" programs build another barrier for participants as the transfer PIC. They do not necessarily include meaningful processes for seeking accountability or tools for preventing future harm.
DOES THIS...	reduce the number of people imprisoned, under surveillance, or under other forms of state control?	reduce the reach of jails, prisons, and surveillance in our everyday lives?	create resources and infrastructures that are steady, preventative, and accessible without police and prison guard contact?	strengthen capacities to prevent or address harm and create processes for community accountability?
Decarceration or reducing the number of people in prisons and jails	YES. Decarceration takes people out of prisons and jails, and out of direct state control, with the aim of supporting people to stay outside.	YES. By de-policing and de-incarcerating jails, prisons, and related systems we reduce the common sense idea that they are necessary and/or "effective."	YES. As part of abolitionist organizing we must focus on getting people out while building strong infrastructures of support.	YES. When we work to dismantle carceral logic, we re-open our work toward decarceration with other ways of responding to and preventing harm, investing in care and prevention for the other.
Shutting down existing jails and prisons and not replacing them	YES. By reducing the number of cages, we can reduce the number of people inside.	YES. When we close a jail or prison and do not replace it with other carceral systems, we chip away at the idea that cages address social, political, and economic problems.	YES. When we organize for it, when we fight to close jails and prisons we can open the way to defund imprisonment and invest in life-sustaining locally that support and sustain people. Abolition is also a BUILDING strategy.	YES. Our work to close prisons and jails and keep them closed is one step toward shifting the focus to addressing and preventing harm without violence and putting resources into that work.
Requiring prosecutor spending for jail and prison construction, renovation, expansion	YES. Nearly all spending projects include enhancements that support arguments for the "benefits" of incarceration.	YES. By reacting spending on jails and prisons, we counter the common-sense argument that they are necessary and reduce the systems reach.	YES. When we reject funding for jails and prisons this can create opportunities to defund imprisonment and invest in infrastructures locally that support and sustain people.	YES. When we reject funding for jails and prisons this can create opportunities to defund imprisonment and invest in infrastructures locally that support and sustain people.
Reducing policing and police contact in general, and "use of life" policing, specifically	YES. Policing leads to imprisonment, and is an important part of systems of control. Reducing police contact reduces the number of people caught in the internal logic system.	YES. Policing is a justification for imprisonment. By reducing police contact, the legitimacy and power of jails and prisons can be reduced.	YES. When we fight to reduce police contact and funding, we can free up state resources. We can organize attention to community-led alternatives that are designed from asking. We must eliminate all forms of policing from social and community services.	YES. Policing does not prevent harm, but actually causes it. Fighting to reduce policing provides opportunities for communities to invest in systems that prevent harm, and create accountability.
Creating voluntary services, community-led infrastructures	YES. Access to services that address needs people articulate for themselves can reduce rationality to police contact and prevent harm, while building sites for self-determination.	YES. Voluntary services that are community-led and self-organized take power away from jails and prisons by removing the focus on imprisonment as a solution for social, economic, and political issues.	YES. When we create services and infrastructures that are designed from asking and investment to community-led alternatives that are designed from asking with the potential to engage with people's complex needs in consistent and trust-building ways.	YES. People getting their needs met in community-determined and led ways prevents harm. By building resources that address harm, without relying on harm, we create opportunities for sustained accountability, but sustained liberation.

A poster designed by Shana Agid for Critical Resistance in 2018 to analyze differences among reforms (see appendices for full text).

The absorption of “care” under the umbrella of criminalization and the blurring of the categories of social need, illness, and criminality—therapeutic governance—is achieved through the guileful mobilization of the false division between private and public spheres. Feminists have long tracked these manipulations: the state frames childcare as a private responsibility but defines fetuses, reproduction, and select caregivers/parents as a public concern subject to partisan political manipulation. For some, (hetero)sexuality is considered a private matter, but queer, HIV-positive, disabled people, and people involved in sex work are subject to state repression. Imbued with a stamp of permanence and inevitability, public/private distinctions not only engineer vulnerability—in-home support, for example, for people with disabilities is a personal responsibility that sometimes engenders risk and precarity—but race, gender, wealth, sexuality, and ability have also always defined who has access to any right to privacy. For example, some states mandate drug testing for recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or other social assistance programs. And the public sphere is always redlined: Women—overwhelmingly non-white—who commit the “crime” of “falsely” enrolling their children in more affluent public school districts where they do not reside are charged and sentenced. In 2011 two Black mothers, Kelley Williams-Bolar and Tanya McDowell, were convicted of felonies for the “falsification of records and theft of public education” and “boundary hopping.”⁴⁷ Far from neutral and static, the malleable contours of public and private not only deepen inequalities but frequently mask the evidentiary traces of racialized, ableist, and heterogendered violence.

Learning from campaigns against new proposed jails in other locations and building on decades of abolition feminist community organizing that rejected policing and incarceration as public health or safety solutions, in 2019 a Los Angeles coalition of organizations including Dignity and Power Now and Critical Resistance, defeated,

for now, the proposed four-thousand-bed jail-like “treatment center” that clearly was not, as advertised, a “care-first” facility. LA had proposed this new “mental health facility” as a replacement for the crumbling Men’s Central Jail and awarded a \$2.2 billion dollar contract to a for-profit corporation with a track record of building jails, McCarthy Building Companies. Under the labor and leadership of community members with direct experiences of incarceration, mainly women of color, the campaign focused on educating communities that it was possible and necessary to disentangle health care services from punishment and highlighted how this could be done. The campaign also worked to make visible why the contract with McCarthy Building Companies was simply an expansion of the existing jail. As Hilda Solia, one of the members of the LA County Board of Supervisors who reversed her vote and rescinded the contract, stated, “A jail is a jail is a jail. It is not enough to change the name of the facility.”⁴⁸ This is the impact of the slow work of abolition feminism in always urgent times, the slow work that has its gaze on the long term.

Another example of how the state manipulates reform agendas is electronic monitoring, which is also increasingly proposed as a kinder compromise when communities push back on new jail or prison construction. Sometimes advanced as a progressive reform, including by some who identify as feminists, e-carceration is lauded as not only cheaper but more humane, as it potentially addresses the criticisms of toxic jail conditions, including lengthy waits for trials and exorbitant bail bonds. Strategically obscured are the high fees that people must pay for their own surveillance devices and the rapidly expanding market for e-carceration. The for-profit GEO Group, which operates the largest number of private prisons in the US, also controlled, under its “GEO Care” division in 2018, about 30 percent of all monitoring devices. These forms of what James Kilgore has called “carceral humanism” or what other scholars have termed “enlightened coercion” or “carceral feminism,” do not eliminate cages.⁴⁹ Rather they redraw them, and thus often make them less transparent, while also widening the boundaries of policing, punishment, and surveillance as astutely demonstrated by Victoria Law and Maya Schenwar in *Prison by Any Other Name: The*

Harmful Consequences of Popular Reforms. It is also, unsurprisingly, a deeply gendered turn: the shift toward electronic monitoring additionally transforms homes into prisons, and wives, mothers, granddaughters, daughters, aunties, and sisters into unpaid jailers. Even when we think we “win” or defeat proposed jail expansion or new construction projects, how and why and with what tools we struggle, matters.

Struggle: Reform or Abolition

Lives are at the core of every abolitionist struggle. In 2015, twenty-two-year-old Kalief Browder (a little brother and a son whose mother nicknamed him Peanut) died by suicide after being imprisoned for over two years at Rikers Island while awaiting trial for allegedly stealing a backpack. Kalief Browder was held in part because he could not post the \$3,000 bail bond. Kalief Browder’s death and the accompanying media attention placed both the jail and the bail bond industry under increased public scrutiny. While brown, Black, queer, and poor communities have long railed against the toxic conditions in jails and the extortion of money bonds, and while groups across New York, including the Sylvia Rivera Law Project and the New York chapters of Critical Resistance, have histories of organizing that include explicit demands for the closure of Rikers Island, Kalief Browder’s death deepened mobilizations. Almost fifty years after people inside the House of D. established bail bond funds, the movement to end cash money bond, and the Campaign to Close Rikers, gained powerful momentum.

In response to mounting pressure from grassroots movements, led and shaped by abolition feminist organizing after Kalief Browder’s death, in 2019 a commission appointed by then mayor Bill de Blasio proposed to close Rikers Island Correctional Facility, the largest jail in the United States, and to open new four jails, one in each borough of the city, with an estimated price tag of almost \$11 billion. This plan would build what an architecture news source described in an unironic statement that borrowed from Michel Foucault’s framework as “a dispersed carceral archipelago.”⁵⁰

Many recognized that four new jails would clearly expand, not shrink, the footprint of incarceration in the city of New York. The siphoning of public dollars to for-profit corporations to build carceral sites, a form of what Jackie Wang terms “racialized accumulation by dispossession,” is just one of the ways that the state funnels public dollars to private coffers.⁵¹ The majority of the \$11 billion initially earmarked will go to for-profit corporations and yet payments will not stop after these jails are built. While many have rightly criticized how political and social movements against “mass incarceration” have often stalled around a narrow focus on divestment from private prisons (as if public prisons might be just fine), abolitionists contend that the ongoing dexterity of racial capitalism requires continual interrogation, particularly of how democratic forms of governance are weaponized to extract wealth from communities.

With strategic and visible direct action, creative memes and media, and organized pressure on key policy makers, No New Jails NYC (NNJNYC) coalesced and amplified resistance and offered tangible public safety strategies. That is, the NNJNYC campaign is not simply about what communities do not want, but, in the tradition of abolition feminism, is centered instead on what people need and want to be safe. Indeed, while the campaign slogan is “no new jails,” the more central demand is to invest public resources into what communities recognize as support for efforts to reduce interpersonal harm and to engender safety. Community forums, workshops, and political education materials, for example, surfaced desires for a non-carceral budget that reflected serious community investment. The NNJNYC website demands “\$11 Billion for the People”:

We call on the city to fund programs that actually keep us safe, reduce interpersonal conflict, and prevent our loved ones from going to jail. These programs include: housing for all, repairing NYCHA [New York City Housing Authority] and shelter conditions; expanding comprehensive community-based and culturally responsive mental health resources; funding harm reduction programs; expanding access to education especially for people who have experienced incarceration; alleviating extreme poverty; ending mass

surveillance and the extraction of wealth from communities through criminal court fines, fees, surcharges, and bail; and stopping false and illegal arrests.⁵²

NNJNYC is against the construction of new jails, but more critically it provides spaces for people to grapple, together, with definitions of authentic public safety—what would make our community safer?—and subsequently generates and circulates tangible pathways. Key partners in the NNJNYC campaign are organizations, including Survived & Punished, Black & Pink, and the Audre Lorde Project, that have spent more than a decade organizing to end gender and sexual violence without relying on carceral responses. This is abolition feminism in practice.

New York City is actively advancing the plan to build four new jails to replace the buildings on Rikers Island. Yet through abolition feminist lenses and metrics—an accounting that extends beyond this immediate political moment—the wins are tangible. Political education materials circulated extensively, highlighting how public safety could be achieved by investing in communities rather than jail expansion. An array of organizations signed on to NNJNYC and made linkages connecting their work around housing justice, quality and free public transit, for meaningful and affirming health care, and against deportations and interpersonal violence. People directly impacted by policing and imprisonment and their loved ones were at the center of the organizing and analysis. Anti-violence organizations played key and visible roles, pushing back on carcerality as the solution to gender and sexual violence. The power of privately hoarded wealth and organized philanthropy to engage in carceral statecraft was temporarily rendered transparent and challenged.⁵³ The carceral roots of liberal Democrats received some exposure. All the tentacles related to jail expansion—including policing—were made visible and were resisted. This campaign moved the starting line for the next step in mobilization: action. The cost? The life of Kalief Browder and too many others.