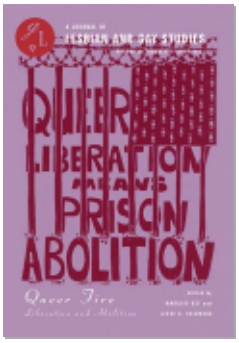
"We're here! We're Queer! Fuck the Banks!": On the Affective Lives of Abolition



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"WE'RE HERE! WE'RE QUEER! FUCK THE BANKS!"

On the Affective Lives of Abolition

Alison Rose Reed

We are fun and creative, and we are trying to live abolition and that is challenging, and that means challenging and questioning and resisting as frequently as possible all the ways that we harm each other and the ways that we are harmed and the ways that we harm ourselves.
—kai lumumba barrow, "Perspectives on Critical Resistance," in *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex*

Hope is a discipline. . . . we have to practice it every single day.
—Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*

Is love a synonym for abolition?
—Saidiya Hartman, "The End of White Supremacy, an American Romance"

There's something strikingly queer, and queerly utopian, about abolition. Literalizing the metaphor of José Esteban Muñoz's (2009: 1) famous statement, "Queerness is not yet here. . . . The here and now is a prison house," this essay argues that the process of affectively reorienting space and minds toward abolition is a queer act. While surely, for 2.5 million people caged by the United States, the here and now is literally a prison house, abolition lives within its walls. An abolitionist analysis is queer in its strategic orientation toward futurity and its refusal

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to put faith into existing institutions, but as we will see, queerness is not always abolitionist. When paired, however, queer abolitionist affects can not only refuse the directives of racial capitalism and disrupt dominant discourses of surveillance, policing, and imprisonment but also imagine—in messy and imperfect ways, as kai lumumba barrow (Samuels and Stein 2008: 4) suggests above—a livable social world. As opposed to reformist logics of "broken" systems, queer abolitionist approaches to shrinking the carceral state recognize the constitutive violence of institutions and seek to reject normative frameworks of legibility. Abolition is here, and its affective lives are queer.

Like queerness, abolition—as both a "beautiful vision" and "practical organizing strategy"—refuses to limit horizons of possibility to the state's demand for simple solutions to complex problems (Shehk 2016). I use the term *queer* not in a strictly identitarian way (although I do not seek to erase queerness as lived experience), but in Cathy J. Cohen's (1997) canonical sense of a shared relationship to power that refuses to mobilize around its terms, as well as in Critical Resistance's (2004: 67) meaning as an organizing principle for transformative coalition building. Leaning into the unknown, dreaming new strategies to heal and reduce harm, and reimagining collectivity, abolition is at once intangible and concrete. This seeming paradox is the necessary precondition for refusing simplistic solutions to centuries-long problems, and moving beyond present impasses of carceral logics, which redouble harm in an effort to mitigate its effects. As Mariame Kaba (Haymarket Books 2021) affirms, in the radical Black feminist tradition of abolition, "'We will figure it out by working to get there' is praxis, not evasion. . . . Organizing is the how." Abolition thus exists in the here and now, from the reimagination of social life to networks of mutual aid to grassroots campaigns to demilitarize, defund, and dismantle the colonial-carceral state.

Queer affects, if not mobilized in service of carceral interests, can open portals to abolition. Such affects compel abolitionist practices if they are understood as orientations fostered over time rather than the outcome of a specific singular event. I here define *affect* capaciously to include intensities, sensations, feelings, and emotions, none of which are simply intrinsic to the body but are instead produced and situated relationally in dense networks of power.[1] Likewise, what Sara Ahmed (2006) describes as orientations trace directional movement toward or away from certain practices and bodies as a result of habitual training. As relationships provide the basic building block of organizing, queer affects can radically inform how to nurture those relationships in abolitionist ways. Therefore, abolition begins with affective and interpersonal relationships that strive toward delegitimizing carceral logics. But abolition does not end there.

Consider, for example, the tangible gains of Critical Resistance's coalitional work in 2019 to stop Urban Shield (a weapons expo and militarized police training) and the construction of two new jails in Los Angeles or, even more recently, the victories toward divesting in deadly institutions and investing in collective self-determination, such as with the Defund Oakland Police Department Coalition. Consider also the Black and Brown youth-led abolitionist campaign of #NoCopAcademy organizers, who fought to redirect $95 million to fund communities over and against the construction of a cop academy in westside Chicago. As both Kaba (2019) and Benji Hart (2019) write, even defeats can be wins for shifting the conversation around redefining "safety" and "community" to be centered on people and not property. Abolition also exists in the organized demands of prison strikes, in trans love behind and beyond bars, and in the sonic vibrations of Mumia Abu-Jamal's voice over Prison Radio.

In exploring the affective dimensions of queer abolition, this essay takes up the spatial and symbolic relationship between the Pride parade and the prison industrial complex (PIC), as the ideological and repressive management of complex social, economic, and political problems with a vicious racialized regime of criminalization, surveillance, policing, and caging.[2] In what follows I demonstrate the urgency of queer abolitionist constellations of affect.

First, I put Muñoz's critical utopianism in conversation with the work of carceral studies scholars and abolitionist organizers (distinct but overlapping categories). This section elaborates on how abolition, as a long-term organizing strategy often derided as utopian,[3] affectively and relationally aligns with the queer register of utopia. More specifically, I explore how both queerness as an analytic and abolitionist approaches can open portals to dream capaciously about intimate and coalitional relationships beyond the nuclear family model to more expansive visions of social life.

Next, I consider what happens when queerness is untethered from abolition via the example of No Justice No Pride actions protesting whitewashed Pride events as well as the LGBTQIA+ embrace of corporations and cops. No Justice No Pride's actions invoked Indigenous two-spirit ancestors, as well as trans and gender-nonconforming people of color as central to fighting state-sanctioned violence and building sustainable futures. The intersectional recuperation of these legacies of resistance to borders, binaries, pipelines, police, and prisons inspires this analysis of abolition's affective lives.

Then, I consider my work with Humanities Behind Bars (HBB), an abolitionist network of radical group-based study and mutual aid. While Pride's corporate capture is neither queer nor abolitionist, I explore how HBB's prison educa-

tion program, in its vision and praxis, is ironically both queer and abolitionist in orientation—ironic because it takes place in a jail and exists within even as it pushes back against neoliberal instructional regimes with their pathologizing and patronizing attitudes toward incarcerated people. Humanities Behind Bars envisions its work as a way to build alliances and facilitate spaces for political education (of "teachers" and "students" alike) across prison walls. Surely, the program is not free from pitfalls, such as the risk of being shut down and its own complex dynamics as an organization. Humanities Behind Bars thus provides an opportunity to think about the tensions and contradictions of practicing abolition in a thoroughly carceral landscape to which it remains antagonistic. By bringing together an analysis of public protest and prison education, I posit that queer affects strengthen and sustain the relationships so vital to abolitionist world making.

Abolition (is) here; abolition (is) now!

Queer Feelings at the End of the World

Echoing Muñoz, queerness is not yet here, but its affective lives have a powerful existence in the present. Abolition requires this reorientation toward each other and away from racial capitalism as a "technology of antirelationality" (Melamed 2011: 78). Being careful not to fetishize the positionalities of queer people of color, Muñoz and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley trace this orientation toward utopian futures, as the world is not yet ready for such expansive ways of loving, desiring, and relating to one another. As Tinsley (2018: 188) writes in homage to Muñoz, his "'forward-dawning futurity' is queer of color time, the warmly illuminated, unreal(ized) future where all our multiparented, unruly, well-loved black and brown children are free to desire creatively." This utopian vision does not preclude that creative desires thrive in the present; the beautiful imagination of other worlds exists alongside daily pockets of pleasure, as well as short- and long-term organizing strategies for a world where such relationships wouldn't be routinely severed by state violence.

The queer affects of abolition materialize utopian visions in daily practice. This "concrete possibility for another world" condenses my use of critical utopianism here (Muñoz 2009: 1), amplified by Black utopian thought (see Zamalin 2019). As Keno Evol (2020) writes of this latter tradition: "Utopia is the point of departure that ends in a non-arrival. Utopia is an infinite activity of relation." Queer utopianism strives to reclaim space in fugitive ways, dreaming of a world where resources and care are self-determined by communities in the name of the collective good. Yet I heed Eric Stanley's (2018: 491) positing of an "affective com-

mons" that comes together, but never arrives, to disrupt the settler-colonialist logics of such spatial reorganizations. Queer utopianism finds concrete expression in the daily actions of creating a "decolonial future without borders or cages" that abolition's affective lives are oriented toward (Walia 2020: 1).

As an affective mode, queer utopianism encapsulates what Muñoz describes as a kind of desiring beyond the romanticization and particular pleasures of so-called negative emotions, which also do important work to give hope dimension. Muñoz finds this hope, which the world seeks to annihilate, in the aesthetic realm as offering utopian blueprints of possibility. It is this "surplus of both affect and meaning within the aesthetic" on which I focus here (Muñoz 2009: 3), necessarily extending to the sphere of organized action. As Kaba (2021: 27) often says, "Hope is a discipline. . . . we have to practice it every single day." This study of affect remains attentive to differential relationships to carceral power and how those relationships shape organizing spaces. A queer abolitionist analysis, therefore, is informed by lived experiences of art and activism. Queer feelings can exceed bodies in and through space; queer feelings aren't just felt by us queers.

Abolition and queerness overlap when they refuse to place faith in institutions to effect change, specifically through legal reforms that redouble the status quo while shunning broader visions of liberation. In other words, abolition can reorient space in a queer way by challenging normative paradigms of power and its critique—thinking about relationship building capaciously, beyond the nuclear family unit. This optic contests discourses of cultural pathology and personal responsibility—popular in liberal dialogues about mass incarceration—that often assert an insufficiently heteronormative family structure as the principal cause of people's suffering, and redeemed fatherhood as the salve for structural racism. The racialized rhetoric of personal responsibility here mutes a more complex, important engagement with how one lives with and among harm, including that of the PIC. From the Moynihan Report to the mythic "superpredator," this discourse of familial pathology came to shape national ideals in the wake of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, effectively blocking social welfare policy in the 1970s, and continuing to attack civil rights gains in the 1980s and 1990s.[4] Moreover, the discourse of cultural pathology taps into centuries-long myths of Black criminality that bolstered massive post–World War II prison-building projects. Queer abolitionist frameworks, in contrast, understand love, family, and collectivity more capaciously as social relations not of domination but of transformation.

Abolition requires an affective shift both against the genocidal project of settler racial capitalism and toward forging alternative ecologies of repairing harm and healing communities. These alternative ecologies address the root causes of

crime—itself a social construction. In the widely circulated web comic "Who's Left? Prison Abolition," illustrated by Flynn Nicholls, Kaba asserts: "I don't know what a world without prisons will look like, but it will fundamentally transform our relationship with other people" (Nicholls 2017). This important claim extends Dylan Rodríguez's (2010: 7; 2019: 1575) contributions about abolition as "in this moment, *primarily pedagogical*" and a "praxis of human being" to think about how relationships provide the foundation for abolitionist ways of knowing, doing, and feeling. Existing in the messy and always incomplete spaces between ideological purity or polarity, abolition's affective lives remain necessarily rooted in forming interpersonal relationships that reject the premise of the white supremacist construction of the "human" as such and its hierarchical, profoundly alienated social organization. Abolition necessitates replacing systems of coercion, criminalization, and control with deep forms of communal care. Of course, love as well as care work can become sites for the reproduction of carcerality; this analysis, however, charts possibilities embedded in movement toward its undoing. I seek neither to romanticize abolition as a pure category nor to cohere it as a static identity, but to trace its manifestations in practice.

Since abolition as a project exists now, it is temporally and ideologically enmeshed in both a less harmful world and the vast harms of this one. Abolition is not just a vital aspiration but a daily action that manifests queer affective orientations toward co-creating a reality that overturns structures of state power while existing antagonistically in relationship to them, understanding that an "outside" positionality is not always possible. To be clear, absolutely central to abolitionist organizing is the understanding that policing and prisons cannot be reformed from the inside and must be dismantled; yet the PIC is also imbricated in educational, political, and financial institutions, for example, from which total freedom presents contradictions and challenges. To secure the resources to survive, many folks negotiate some kind of strategic spatial situation within oppressive institutions, while battling against self-definition by and the sinister seductions of those very institutions; material survival must therefore be attended by soul work, to consider the consequences of one's attachments and labor. The queer affects of abolition imagine different social relations to move us from an unlivable social world to a livable one, but those affects exist in tension with the institutions on which people rely for material survival. This essay does not presume to proffer a solution but instead to recognize how in a constitutively violent society, unless one goes completely off the grid on previously uninhabited land (which already prefigures the colonial romance of Robinson Crusoe), material and spiritual survival will be at odds; the work is to imagine and enact ways of closing that gap collectively.

The queer utopian register of abolition insists—as a matter of spiritual survival—on possibility and pleasure amidst systemic pain, on alternative ways of organizing social life amidst economies of death. This reference to death economies does not seek to conflate grossly distinct experiences of violence but instead to acknowledge how the prison and military industrial complexes intentionally annihilate, both socially and materially, enemies and extras of the state's maintenance of racial capitalism. It also follows Dean Spade's (Stanley, Spade, and Queer (In)Justice 2012: 125) critique of how "rights strategies tend to affirm the law's role in creating and maintaining classes of undeserving outsiders marked for death." Precisely because abolition has often been pejoratively described as utopian—especially by liberal reformists who maintain a vested interest in the carceral state, and whose strategies do not question the notion of "legitimate" state violence—the utopian can be strategically reclaimed to emphasize how abolition delineates an epistemological and practical position beyond just being anti-police and anti-prison, to one firmly grounded in agitating for another world.

To reference a specific idiom from Saidiya Hartman (2020) and others on how anti-blackness fundamentally shapes modern institutions, which in turn cannot be reformed but must be razed, abolition signifies "the end of the world." Abolition dwells—affectively and relationally—in the space between the end of this world and the beginning of another. This imaginative capacity to envision new social relations is rooted in the ineffability and necessity of love, notwithstanding its fragile beauty and betrayals. As Hartman (2020) asks, "Is love a synonym for abolition?" Of course, the context for this question grapples with love's "temporary reprieve" or temporal respite from the violence of whiteness. Yet amid impossibility, the demolition of this world is exercised in the present through collective practices of care that combat constitutive anti-blackness.

The end of the world recognizes that the tragic is part of the fabric of daily living, channeling James Baldwin's ([1963] 1993: 91–92) statement in *The Fire Next Time* about feeling "responsible to life," precisely because life is tragic: "It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life." This responsibility refuses to organize death-in-life "totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations," and other myths of civilization premised on hierarchy, exclusion, subordination, and violence. In other words, Baldwin's vision makes clear the need to abolish violent containers of meaning (e.g., the false binaries of free/unfree, innocent/guilty, legal/illegal, man/woman and the edifices that consolidate them, such as cages). As an entry point to leaning into the impossible, an abolitionist analysis embraces life, how to love

capaciously and heal harm, and the space of imagination, where one might feel portals opening to another world. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Kushner 2019) says of abolitionist alternatives to the constitutive violence of the military and prison industrial complexes, "where life is precious, life is precious."

No Justice, No Pride

On June 13, 2013, I spent a boozy afternoon at a Pride celebration in Santa Barbara, California, bumping into old flames, flirting with a future girlfriend, and dancing merrily to drag queens performing onstage. When I returned home, nothing was more sobering than learning of George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin, as another tragic example of how the state sanctions Black death. My beach day of romance and glitter suddenly felt perverse, complicit even. The violent simultaneity of corporatized Pride events held unwittingly against the backdrop of stolen Black lives has stuck with me ever since.

The example of Pride's coinciding with Zimmerman's acquittal parallels Chandan Reddy's (2011: 39) theorization of freedom with violence, or how "socially and institutionally produced forms of emancipation remain regulatively and constitutively tied to the nation-state form." For example, Reddy (17) literalizes the metaphor of amendments (e.g., how the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Bill Prevention Act amends the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act, which allocated the largest budget for the Department of Defense in history, and the 1969 Civil Rights Act) to reveal in part how rights-based and legal forms of social emancipation remain linked to global violence and racial capitalism, with race as the "political unconscious" of sexuality. It comes as no surprise, then, given Reddy's analysis of how sexuality amends race, that the partial overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act went hand in hand in 2013 with the dismantling of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But that, of course, is not the end of the story. Zimmerman's acquittal and subsequent mass mobilizations around Justice for Trayvon reverberated locally and across the country, as students of color at the University of California, Santa Barbara (where I was a PhD candidate at the time) took the lead organizing the Santa Barbara Coalition for Justice. This collective of students, faculty and staff, seasoned activists, and community members organized to hold a series of actions, from a silent vigil to teach-ins to a march through downtown, disrupting onlooking shoppers funneling in and out of bourgeois boutiques. The wealthy white areas of Santa Barbara—downtown State Street being a prime example—are aggressively policed, as rich retirees and vacationing celebrities funnel funds into police

departments protecting their multimillion-dollar beachfront properties. The march's route intentionally proceeded down State Street for maximum disturbance to business as usual. Protestors sang and shouted rallying cries, while holding signs with messages such as "#NoMoreEmmettTills." We had thrown a poster-making party in the days leading up to the march, so many of the signs themselves were confrontational art statements in fluorescent colors. As a legal observer at the crowd's periphery, I witnessed the stark boundary of powerful resistance and the eyes of outsiders, looking on in curiosity or contempt. That is to say, the affective energy of the marchers, expressing righteous rage and loving solidarity, an emotional pulse that vibrated through my body, was met with the opposite facial expressions of confusion, guilt, or disdain by shoppers sipping brunch cocktails on outdoor patios lining the street.

Affect is itself a performance of boundary. Affect can demarcate both belonging and unbelonging in a given space. Affective responses to art and activism can create a border of feeling with and for state power or protestors against it. While protest itself can be contained and incorporated by the state, its affective afterlives, in their intangibility, cannot so easily be erased from space. As I observed at the march and during its aftermath, participating in protest can cohere queer feelings, radicalizing people.

Meanwhile, some faces continue to twist and warp at a hashtag, or say #BlackLivesMatter in the same breath as calling for community dialogues with cops, or redirect what "defund the police" means to soothe the feelings of liberals, whose fantasies of safety smooth over the carceral state's constitutive violences. Such responses produce support for reforms that bolster the state by pouring more money into its brutal machinations. Abolition, however, as a way of knowing and doing, posits that justice does not look like a multicultural or legal Band-aid but is a broader call for systemic transformation, as well as a way of organizing social relations in the present that recognizes the limited authority of the dominant. Inclusion never equals transformation when its terms are a morally bankrupt ascension to racial-colonial carceral violence.

As is evident by the marriage equality movement, lesbian and gay people have entered the mainstream and appealed to corporate markets; however, trans radicals of color, Indigenous two-spirit folks, abolitionist queers, rebel dykes, and otherwise antiassimilationist LGBTQIA+ people continue to refuse the narrow terms of mainstream Pride campaigns, organized around overwhelmingly white, middle-class, corporate, pro-military, and pro-cop interests. For example, "We're Here! We're Queer! Fuck the Banks!," an anticapitalist Pride chant heard in Oakland, California, in June 2017, rails against the corporate co-optation of Pride

month from its roots in the 1969 Stonewall uprising, which was not an isolated event in history but preceded and followed by protests and organizing against the criminalization and brutalization of queer and trans people (such as the Compton's Cafeteria Riot of 1966). This historical militant queer victory was not just about fighting back against the police but also about mobilizing for queer liberation for all those vulnerable to state violence, including people of color, poor queens, trans folks, sex workers, and unhoused youth.[5] After all, queerness as an analytic should not be divorced from self-identified queer people, but must remain tied to its attendant radical organizing praxis that refuses the myopia of single-issue identity politics. As Stanley writes (Stanley, Spade, and Queer (In)Justice 2012: 116), "Many trans/queer people have found ways to exist beside, build community in spite of, and struggle against the police state. From alternative methods of accountability and organizing direct actions, to collective self-defense, including these forms of resistance helps build a more expansive definition of abolition." The Pride chant referenced above, therefore, expresses abolition's affective charge, which reclaims space ("We're Here!") with a queer energy that remains hostile to racial capitalist institutions ("We're Queer! Fuck the Banks!"). Likewise, a queer abolitionist analysis moves beyond the profit-motive myth of incarceration (see Kushner 2019) to the more complex relationship between finance capital and the PIC, as an overwhelmingly public (i.e., government) institution.[6]

To combat intensified voices of ever-present hate in the fascistic era of Donald Trump (before the election of Joe Biden provided false comfort to liberals), community organizers amplified the abolitionist critique of assimilationist politics and the recuperation of queer and trans of color legacies of resistance. During the summer of 2017, Pride events were scheduled in the aftermath of Officer Jeronimo Yanez's acquittal for the devastating video-recorded murder of Philando Castille—as well as the brutal murders of Charleena Lyles and Nabra Hassanen on the heels of each other, as just three examples of anti-Black, racist, sexist, and Islamophobic forms of structural hate. No Justice No Pride actions sprang up at Pride parades from Washington, DC, to New York City to Seattle—protesting the long-standing collusion of Pride events with corporate interests and cops. As No Justice No Pride's (2017) Facebook event page announced, "We are the dreams of our indigenous two spirit ancestors who existed pre-colonization. We must remember that our liberation has been led by trans and gender-nonconforming people of color who had nothing to lose. PRIDE WAS BORN FROM RESISTANCE TO STATE SANCTIONED VIOLENCE!" Of course, activists often necessarily inhabit contradictions; their anticapitalist statement is here made on a corporate platform. Even so, as these demonstrations against corporatized Pride affirm,

struggles against state power cannot always exist outside it, but organizers aspire toward the idea that liberation cannot be rooted in someone else's oppression. While such aspirations may seem like theoretical sentimentalism, a queer abolitionist analysis traces the affective and relational labor people perform in their daily lives. This labor is complicated, sometimes chaotic, and always incomplete. As barrow (Samuels and Stein 2008: 4) explains: "It's important for us to communicate with folks that we don't have answers; we are like everybody else, trying to figure out how to change the world."

No Justice No Pride protestors, in coalition with decolonial abolitionist groups such as Hoods4Justice, were harassed and arrested by police across the country.[7] Yet liberals continue to fantasize about, and remain affectively invested in, cops. For example, in an article titled "Straight New York City Cop Shares Pride Message You Won't Soon Forget," Greg Hernandez (2017) writes about one New York Police Department officer who shared a message of "solidarity" with Pride-goers that went viral: "He identifies himself only as 'Huge Fat Loser' and posts a photo of himself wearing a T-shirt that reads: 'I may be straight but I don't hate.' He then shares a list of reasons why he worked last weekend's Pride event. It's a thorough and thoughtful list that any LGBTI person can identify with." The direct second-person address in the title, combined with the absence of *Q* in its catalog of queer identities, implies a normative reader who seeks fellowship with the police. The officer's Facebook post explains that he plans to work PrideFest with the shirt under his uniform, as if sartorial layering could create a peaceful palimpsest of state violence and love-driven politics. His dedication includes cops and gay 9/11 victims, while positioning the police as protectors of queer people: "For every call I went to where someone got kicked out of their house or who's [*sic*] family just didn't understand. For anyone who's had to hide who they are. I've got your back. Love is Love." He ends his emotional appeal with hashtags #LoveIsLove, #Pride, #PrideParade, #NYPD, #IGotYou, and #FreeHugs. People flocked to his Facebook post to embrace this cop's promise and celebrate his supposedly progressive celebration of law-abiding Pride attendees. This co-opted version of Pride, in bed with cops and the system of criminalization and caging they actively maintain, is a dystopian rather than utopian horizon. When love means not only accepting but also openly embracing the agents of state violence, a queer abolitionist analysis posits the urgency of reclaiming love not as love but in struggle, as a form of communal care and spiritual sustenance.

When we, following Grace Lee Boggs, Robin D. G. Kelley, and other visionaries,[8] offer up a transformative politics of relationality, then, we must be specific about what we mean by love. That is to say, we must continue to disrupt the active

investment in celebrating cops under the banner "Love Is Love." Against the sanitized multicultural celebration of empathy, compassion, and love for others as a solution to social ills in and of itself, the Black radical tradition (and other revolutionary epistemologies) reclaims love's transformative power when used toward dismantling carceral power and building toward another world. Love, anger, and other affects that can compel action remain vital to the ongoing work. Grand narratives of social histories can deemphasize the micro-movements people make in their everyday psychic and social lives, punctuated by grief and joy. Pointing to the coexistence of such affects scales the study of social movements down to the subtle transformations of daily relational praxis. As adrienne maree brown (2020: 2–3) writes, "We must work hard at getting abolitionist practice functional at a small scale so that large-scale abolition and transformative justice are more visible, rootable, possible."[9] While always imperfect, our approach to relationships must strive to acknowledge power dynamics and honor the best in each other and ourselves, collectively cultivating radical visions of love as an everyday practice and organized commitment to healing harm without resorting to carcerality.

Abolitionist Prison Education?

Before COVID-19 moved classrooms online, or in the case of some prison education programs, postponed courses altogether, every week I would pack my mesh tote with photocopied reading materials separated by hot-pink sticky notes, dry-erase markers, writing utensils, extra ballpoint pens, and a yellow pad of discussion prompts or impromptu lecture ideas, before making the eight-minute drive from my apartment to the local jail, tucked so squarely behind the downtown courthouse so as to be visible only from the freeway. After collecting my ticket and driving through the pay lot partition to park, I would leave my cell phone, wallet, and other personal belongings in my glove compartment aside from the driver's license required for entrance. Walking from the parking structure to the jail entrance, I would often nod to folks coming from the courthouse or jail, while avoiding the gaze of cops leaving a shift and the catcalls of construction workers nearby. In front of the never-ending construction zone, thrown into relief by neon-orange makeshift mesh fencing, I would pass a sign before being buzzed through a heavy security door after saying the magic words to gain admittance: Humanities Behind Bars (HBB). The aluminum reflective sign does more than indicate to visitors that a byzantine parking structure surrounded by other city administrative buildings, all brutalist in architectural design, is in fact connected to the jail; it reads "Jail/Public Safety." This conflation of a space that cages humans await-

ing trial or transfer with "public safety" provides an unwelcome reminder of the violent logics of carceral society.

Once past the main entrance, you walk a little way longer through an additional parking lot to another heavy blue door that leads to the receiving dock and security checkpoint. Once, a cop startled me by emerging through that door with gun pointing eye level, as if whoever just so happened to be there could serve as a practice target. I'll never know why I was greeted that way (he offered no explanation), but these kinds of arbitrary flashes of state violence become routine, making it necessary to decompress after leaving such an intentionally traumatic space—a privilege not afforded to those caged by the state and whose experience of that trauma and violence is, it goes without saying, far more severe. Once through security (the see-through bag must go through the metal detector, the body must be inspected with a handheld scanner), the programs director or someone else summoned in the office would meet me at security and escort me to the classroom. Its location changed over time, ranging from a table bolted to the floor between two occupied cellblocks, where attorneys would consult with their clients, to an actual classroom with a whiteboard on the newfangled programming block. When that classroom was being renovated, I remember once meeting in a recently emptied cellblock. Behind the bars where the jail staff left us, you could still smell the sweat and waste of bodies. We retooled the space to make it our own, covering over an exposed urinal with the thick plastic of a shower curtain. This was our last class, and the relationships we had formed over the course of a semester were meaningful to us. The jail library was no longer accepting donations, and students criticized how they never had proper access to books anyway, with guards arbitrarily confiscating their class materials on the regular. Due to and despite these facts, I had brought in some books I picked out for each student, tailored to their interests, from the HBB library of donations for future book drives. That day, in our unusually quiet corner of the jail, we read each other poetry we had written that was inspired by the course, "The Poetics and Politics of US History." Studying, plotting, and planning with jailed students can teach valuable lessons about abolitionist organizing and the imperative to listen carefully not just to famous political prisoners, whose revolutionary thought can easily be romanticized, but also to everyday people whose analyses of the state and of interpersonal harm dwell in the messy, troubling zones where important work takes place.

In 2016 Meghan G. McDowell and I cofounded Humanities Behind Bars, which began as a prison education program and later added a pen-pal project, radical inside–outside study group, mutual aid network, and local bail fund. We started as a strategic partnership between the city jail and the university we both

taught at, but the only source of funding from the university was a research assistantship sponsored by the graduate school. This assistantship was one of the first things to go with budget cuts made under the auspices of COVID-19 austerity measures. The university nonetheless continues to selectively honor and claim HBB as its own, despite the fact that we are a grassroots community-based organization with no official relationship to the university and no paid staff. All the money we raise goes toward supporting currently and formerly incarcerated people, directly through the mutual aid and bail funds, and indirectly through our minimal general operation costs for the prison education and pen-pal programs (e.g., books and supplies for classes, stamps and envelopes for letter-writing sessions). Well aware of the necessary critique of the nonprofit industrial complex (see INCITE! 2007), HBB decided over time to become a registered 501(c)(3) because otherwise we could not legally fundraise in the state of Virginia, a litigious issue that concerned enough of HBB's members to take action. We collectively decided, after many meetings with the core team and consultation with longtime organizers and movement lawyers, that despite the problems of such incorporation, we wanted to ensure our long-term sustainability; this proved strategic, as in 2020 HBB raised over $100,000 for the Tidewater Solidarity Bail Fund (modeled after and in relationship with the Richmond Community Bail Fund). We take seriously the work of organizing mutual aid and political education by building solidarity with people across prison walls. Networks of mutual aid "work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need" (Spade 2020: 9). Mutual aid is political education in action.

We often reflect on the seeming incommensurability of abolition as well as mutual aid with "prison education," as such programming often relies on neoliberal modes of instruction and charity models of benevolent saviorism under state-captured notions of social justice and public engagement. Indeed, HBB cofounders have elsewhere written not only on the seeming incompatibility and generative im/possibility of prison education and abolition, but also on how affective shifts in classroom spaces and the formation of prohibited forms of conviviality disrupt the neoliberal carceral presumptions of such programming (McDowell and Reed 2018). Because of our abolitionist orientation, which we don't flaunt to guards or administrators but is evident in the content and comportment of our courses, our program is always at risk of being shut down and has come close on a number of occasions; for example, class has been interrupted for questioning by panels of cops, and educators have been disciplined for breaking the rules (of appropriate attire, for instance).

By content and comportment, I refer to what and how we teach, even though

the state often explicitly prohibits the formation of bonds over texts in the Black radical tradition. As a mundane example, HBB educators have been instructed by some jail staff to never make eye contact with "inmates," state language that consolidates supposed criminality into an identity formation. After the mandatory jail training, HBB includes its own orientation in which we unpack the problems with such belittling actions and language, and discuss our efforts to study *beside* and not teach *to* those who elect to participate. Humanities Behind Bars has to maintain this strained and strategic relationship to the state in order to study and organize with jailed artists and activists.

Although we use the classroom space to make collective organizing decisions and mobilize around student demands, HBB members have often discussed the uncomfortable knowledge that our program, as one of many at the jail, feeds state narratives of humane and rehabilitative jailing by providing educational services free of charge. While not all HBB educators are affiliated with nearby universities, the fact that its cofounders are college professors lends the program additional legitimacy. Adding to the tensions and contradictions of HBB is student participation. Because we are not a degree-granting program, students choose to be there not for credentialing purposes but for a myriad of other reasons, certainly including but not limited to the desire to study or, more practically, work toward a GED (such courses are offered at the jail) or other degree (upon release). Either way, programmatic participation reflects well on incarcerated people when they go to court. The jail, however, only allows "non-violent offenders" to take courses, which further reinforces the worthy/unworthy divide that structures the neoliberal university and prison education alike.

Despite these constraints, courses remain spaces to organize as well as to study, and students have expressed gratitude for the way HBB extends those spaces—and the contributions made therein—into the community. Abolitionist organizing, after all, takes its lead from currently and formerly incarcerated people who bring vital analyses to the table, while not romanticizing those analyses as beyond critique. Some students, for complex reasons, rehearse harmful state logics in constructing their own redemption narrative by appealing to the category of "worthy" that disappears the allegedly unworthy. Organizing with currently and formerly incarcerated students also presents difficulties in finding ways to collectively secure people's material needs to survive without reproducing the moral citizenship/charity model of the nonprofit sector and the regulatory function of "reentry" programs. In sum, being in tactical relation to institutions at times operates from a place of constrained need. Abolitionist analyses must continue to critically address the ethics of this interpersonal and institutional messi-

ness, refuting false binaries of working within oppressive institutions or existing outside them.

Teaching in a jail or prison is marked by violent affective incommensurability: the cruelty of cages and those invested in them, against the fugitive laughter and other affects brought on by the togetherness formed through a positioning against the carceral state via conspiratorial study of its mechanisms, and toward how the radical imagination dreams otherwise amidst it. For example, once, while staging Black feminist Marita Bonner's one-act play *The Purple Flower* at the jail, a usually shy student belted out a dramatic line with such gusto that the class burst out in uproarious laughter with him. This moment reminds me of the significance of shared laughter, movement, and joy when studying serious topics, while remaining attentive to people's lived experiences. To be sure, whether at a jail or on campus, I am not suggesting we treat traumatic histories—and people's embodied relationship to them—lightly. For example, when discussing the play's setting, students theorize Bonner's spatialization of racial power in relationship to their condition of incarceration. Yet all the more so in a space where trauma is everywhere felt, this seriousness must be balanced with the social possibilities of riotous laughter and other fugitive affects.

Of course, the relational possibilities embedded in such affective shifts, and the comradeships formed between jailed "students" and HBB "educators," exist amidst a deep well of pain that can never be resolved—the existence of cages. Abolitionist affects of love and rage, then, insist on possibility not out of some romantic sense of messianic rupture detached from the weight of experience, but precisely because to not insist with urgency on another world leads quite literally to spiritual and material death. These containers of human cages are intentionally traumatic. Moreover, one cannot simply go on living as before while knowing a loved one is incarcerated. It is a heaviness, the freedom of movement weighted by close proximity to profound unfreedom. Therefore, queer utopianism is not a refuge but an insistence that social relationships and collective creativity remain vital to survival. Relationships, with all their messiness and loss, joy and pleasure, rowdiness and rebelliousness, breakdowns and breakups, grief and tragedy, impasses and irreconcilabilities, teach vital lessons and make social movements possible. As HBB activist-poet and former student Dom Roscoe (2020) writes, in a dreamy, elliptical mode that breathes on the page, reclaiming space: "I'm not an incarcerated mind, but a MIND'S EYE OF INCARCERATION spinning . . . . . [Freely] . . . . . What does it cost to pay attention?—Nothing; So listen, are you free?—." Replacing the liberal discourse of dehumanization with an insistence on his privileged optic on power—whereby he focuses attention on the inhumanity of its active and

complicit agents—Roscoe redefines freedom within a new economy of value, the exhortation to pay attention to the ongoing Black liberation struggle. He asks his reader, "are you free?," demanding a reconsideration of the very terms of freedom of mind and body. Roscoe's poem serves as a powerful indictment of carceral logics and a reminder that as long as millions remain in cages, none are free.

Against Incorporation

Abolition exists in the everyday work being done in people's intimate relationships and on the ground to create a world without the structuring logics and edifices of cops, cages, and borders. This work uses a variety of tactics and strategies to get closer to that world, existing in antagonistic relationship to institutions. Its mode of queer utopian feeling is already here as process, in concerted actions to break down the prison industrial complex while nurturing collectives of care and exercising commitments to being an enemy of the carceral state.

Like queer and trans social identities and organizing work, abolition has seen heightened mainstream attention in the twenty-first century. Increased visibility can paradoxically obscure as it reveals, incorporating bodies and ideas absent commitments to struggle.[10] The proliferation of conversations about "mass incarceration" (as if simply less incarceration encapsulates the solution) has seen the obfuscation of what abolition means in the present day. Myopic understandings of history will lead to misguided propositions for change; an abolitionist analysis of the carceral state seeks to make real gains toward its dismantling, because of and not in spite of its refusal to cooperate with cops and corporations.

While a more thorough analysis of these recent developments is beyond the scope of this essay, I want to note them in closing to emphasize that a co-opted version of abolition that reconciles itself to cop-friendly or corporate viewpoints is another form of carceral antiracist incorporation that, as Joy James (2020) writes, has become popularized in academia. This righteous warning against the untethering of abolition from the revolutionary demands of Black freedom struggle makes clear the tensions and contradictions of fighting for another world while working within this one. Transformative social change lies not with politicians or within university walls but with the people, within community organizing spaces as well as "the cultivation of the Black radical imagination." As Charlene A. Carruthers (2018: 33) writes, "It is within the spaces of imagination, the dream spaces, that liberatory practices are born and grow, leading to the space to act and to transform."

At this historical conjuncture, in the wake of sustained uprisings dur-

ing the COVID-19 summer of 2020, emergent possibilities are being materialized in daily life, and the radicalization of liberal publics is happening seemingly overnight. It's a moment indicative of the power of ongoing social movements. Of course, this people power will meet backlash, incorporation, and new challenges, but the point is the people do have power. We are now seeing long legacies of abolitionist organizing led by Black feminists, queer and trans people, and incarcerated activists play out in the streets, on social media, and in quarantined classrooms. Without minimizing the very real presence of state-sanctioned carceral terror and the deep grief born out of it, abolitionist affects (from love to rage) provide an alternative to the soul-crushing status quo. As abolitionist organizers like to joke, we always throw the best parties. And we say this not because we value fancy things or kitschy drinks but because we value each other, our shared laughter, and indefatigable passion for building another world. Abstract analyses of power speak only shallowly to material realities. The poetry of life, from protests to parties, engages both in critique and celebration.[11] Again, understanding the "party" as a metaphor for the strength of relationships in building movements and dismantling the prison industrial complex, abolitionists have been saying, of late, welcome to the party! Glad you have arrived.

Notes

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1. See, for example, Ahmed 2013.
2. This definition is adapted from Critical Resistance's widely circulated version, available on their website (criticalresistance.org).
3. For a hotly contested example of dismissing abolition as simply "pie-in-the-sky imaginings," see Lancaster 2017.
4. For more on the Moynihan Report, see Ferguson (2004: 119–23).
5. For instance, in 1970 Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson founded STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), which countered liberal, exclusionary agendas.
6. For more on this relationship, see Gilmore 2007.
7. See Grinberg 2017 and Ring 2017.
8. See, for example, Kelley 2015.

9. For more on the scalar dimensions of social movement(s), see brown 2017.
10. See Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton 2017.
11. This formulation of critique and celebration is indebted to Fred Moten. See Moten 2016.

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