

## CHAPTER 12

## CRISIS, CRITIQUE, AND ABOLITION

ANDREW DILTS

In a series of essays in the *Boston Review*, published over the course of the year following Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the United States, the historian Robin D. G. Kelley takes stock of the crisis posed by the electoral success of Trumpism.<sup>1</sup> The election of Trump, Kelley notes, was not to be taken lightly. "Donald J. Trump's election," Kelley writes, "was a national trauma, an epic catastrophe that has left millions in the United States and around the world in a state of utter shock, uncertainty, deep depression, and genuine fear." But, he continues, "the outcome should not have surprised us."<sup>2</sup>

As a historian of African American culture and politics, Kelley has always drawn attention to how the experience and thought of Black people in the United States demonstrates how white supremacy is, as the philosopher Charles Mills puts it, "the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today."<sup>3</sup> Kelley's analysis does not deny that reinvigorated and growing fascist movements are seizing on electoral successes, consolidating and legitimating their power. But it would be wrong, Kelley insists, to see this as a profoundly "new" crisis. "We are not facing an aberration," he writes, "an unexpected crisis in a system that is otherwise a well-oiled democracy."<sup>4</sup> If the crisis of Trumpism appears "new," this is less because of a radical break with US traditions of domination and oppression, but more because we are seeing a *return* to an unapologetic and open form of white supremacy as a political system. Kelley reminds us that we ought to understand this crisis as the most recent in the long series of crises faced by putatively democratic nations founded on and

maintained by mass exclusion, forced labor, colonialism, and genocide. Or as Kelley put it more succinctly during a plenary lecture in the summer of 2017: "Crisis for whom? My folks have been living in crisis for years before Trump."<sup>5</sup>

Across these essays, Kelley reflects on how the sense of crisis felt by many in the United States found its sharpest form not merely among those on the political left, but moreover as a crisis *within* in the left. When the election outcome was quickly framed in terms of "economic anxiety" (overlooking evidence that racial resentment was a far stronger predictor of support for Trump), many on the left turned their anger toward organizers of color and left critics of establishment Democratic politics. "The response on the part of high-profile liberals and leftists," Kelley wrote shortly after Trump's inauguration, "has been to blame 'identity politics' for undermining the potential for working-class solidarity."<sup>6</sup> According to such an account, "people of color, queer folks, feminist-minded women, and liberal Democrats alienated the white working class, driving it into the arms of Trump."<sup>7</sup> This argument, as Kelley notes, "is both inept and confused":

The movements associated with "identity liberalism" have not been obsessed with narrow group identities but with forms of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization. And these movements are not exclusionary—not Black Lives Matter, not prison abolitionists, not movements for LGBTQ, immigrant, Muslim, and reproductive rights. They are serious efforts to interrogate the sources of persistent inequality, the barriers to equal opportunity, and the structures and policies that do harm to some groups at the expense of others.<sup>8</sup>

It has been with disturbing frequency that those who might otherwise insist that they are "allies" to movements for Black, queer, indigenous, or gender liberation seem to be among the first to reject demands for the end to the violence of police, for the end of incarceration (in all its forms, and not only its "mass" formation), for the end of borders, capitalism, patriarchy, and settler colonialism. Such demands, the argument goes, are not only taken to be impossible, but, in the light of rising fascism, irresponsible. Even well before the 2016 US presidential election, hyperbolic forms of concern appeared from within the left, insisting that *criticism* and *critique* would result in electoral losses for the left, and that critics themselves would be responsible for things like "left-wing voter suppression."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps this is not surprising: when traditionally liberal and center-left political positions appear to be under direct attack, there is a tendency to shy away from more radical political positions, and retrench around a nostalgia for welfare-liberalism, in which the norms of multiculturalism and inclusion were subsumed under the neoliberal consensus between the center-left and reactionary conservatism. And as part of this latest iteration of left-wing melancholia,

there is a powerful incentive to invest in electoral politics (rather than support radical confrontations with fascists), to be “realistic” (rather than demand the impossible), and to support the reform of police or prisons (rather than abolish them). But what if the *particular* danger of this crisis is that our responses to it remain deeply *attached* to settler-colonial-hetero-patriarchal-white-supremacist institutions and practices? What if, rather than break these attachments, we rearticulate these attachments as necessary given “what is currently possible” during a crisis?

If the current crisis is a *new* crisis—rather than also a continuation of the ongoing crisis marked by the intersecting exclusions of indigenous people, Black folks, and women—then it is very much a crisis of center-left liberalism. And it is one in which radical critique is most necessary. In this essay, I argue that a mode of radical critique that is particularly suited to this moment is already available. It is a tradition of historical and critical analysis that builds (in part) on the work W. E. B. Du Bois, extended theoretically by the philosopher Angela Davis (among others), and practiced widely by social movement organizers under the name of abolitionist politics. “Abolition Democracy” is the name given by Du Bois to the short-lived period of time in the years following the Civil War in which abolishing chattel slavery included both the “negative” emancipation of Black people from bondage and the “positive” building of institutions, practices, and resources necessary for Black freedom. As invoked by twentieth-century abolitionist thinkers and organizers, it serves as one basis for the broader abolitionist movement (typically focused on prison and police abolition but operating in concert with a variety of movements for self-determination and liberation). And, as I will argue here, abolition offers a robust model of critique, especially suited to our current moment, precisely because it is an open-ended project of world-building.<sup>10</sup>

I carry this brief for abolitionist critique in three parts, moving from higher levels of abstraction to the concrete. First, I give a general account of abolitionist *theory*, connecting Du Bois’s historical account of the “Abolition Democracy” to a dialectical theory of critique and analysis. Second, I narrow my focus to consider contemporary abolitionist *practice*, showing how abolitionist critique is always connected to specific political and social action, but in which action is better understood as an ongoing practice or organizing strategy in which positive building and negative dismantling move together. Third, I demonstrate the interconnection between abolitionist theory and practice with the case of Critical Resistance, one of the best known and oldest prison abolition organizations in the United States. It is my claim that the work and thought of Critical Resistance mobilizes rather than demobilizes people through—and not in spite of—their commitment to a ruthless critique of reformism. As such, I close by considering what this ought to mean for those of us concerned not merely for the health of “critique” in the face of

fascism and liberal retrenchment, but also for those concerned for the ongoing work of liberation from the settler-colonial, white supremacist, and hetero-patriarchal systems in which we continue to find ourselves.

## Abolition Democracy and Critique

*For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures.*

—Audre Lorde

The imperative of abolition, its political and theoretical force, is to dismantle, build, and transform from within existing systems of oppression. It is to acknowledge given conditions as real, material, and compelling. Yet in doing so, the abolitionist imperative recognizes *how* those conditions have been given their reality, their materiality, and their force. It is a refusal to let those conditions remain fixed or naturalized, even when the project of dismantling, building, and transforming appears to be impossible. It does not allow the *current* crisis to foreclose acknowledgment of the *ongoing* crisis. Abolition is itself the work of radical negation, of an immoderate and even fanatical saying “no.” It is the “no” against the current order that opens the ground for other ways of living and acting that do not rely on that current order’s logic or demands.

As a *political* and *theoretical* project, abolition identifies specific institutions (such as the police or the prison) and traces out their constitutive practices and ways of thinking, marking these practices and epistemes as the *objects* to be dismantled and transformed. It names these institutions as themselves *problems* to be confronted, even when they do not *appear* as problems. Far too often, “problems” are often already presented in digestible and understandable terms, as things with which we are already familiar and which trouble us because they disrupt the normal flow of practices and events. In such a framing, problems seem obvious. Yet this seeming obviousness of what is (and what is not) a problem is itself a way to direct our thinking about them and action in response to them. To take problems as stated, or as given, is to approach problems as the domain of “policy” expertise, which typically forecloses critical analysis.<sup>11</sup>

The question is to trace *how* such problems can present themselves “as such.” As the philosopher Sarah Tyson describes it: critique is the practice of inhabiting something in a meaningful way such that one learns where and how that thing breaks down, and *then* pursuing *that breakdown* as an object of thought and action.<sup>12</sup> Critique occurs when one moves beyond the normative description or evaluation of something, some event, or some practice, to include those

things taken for granted in the evaluation of that thing. It is a tracing of the breakdown, as a way of discovering how a problem has come to appear as one: a genealogy of becoming a problem. And it requires an immanence (an inhabiting, a staying close) with the object of critique that is necessarily uncomfortable, disturbing, and risky. It reframes "problems" and corresponding "solutions" as the outcomes of political projects, rather than as natural kinds.

Such analysis is always already historical, and this should be no surprise, given the connections that contemporary abolitionist theory draws with its historical antecedents. In the United States, this connection is invoked as the "unfinished" or "unfulfilled" project of abolishing chattel slavery. As the ethnic studies scholar and abolitionist Dylan Rodríguez explains:

It's both a tremendous obligation and honor to undertake the unfulfilled work of the best of our abolitionist precursors—those who did not only want the abolition of white supremacist slavery and normalized anti-Black violence, but who also recognized that the greatest promise of abolitionism was a comprehensive transformation of a civilization in which the sanctity of white civil society was defined by its capacity to define "community" and "safety" through the effectiveness of its ability to wage racial genocides. The present day work of . . . abolition has to proceed with organic recognition of its historical roots in liberation struggles against slavery, colonization, and conquest.<sup>13</sup>

Such a historical approach draws directly from Du Bois's account of the Abolition Democracy. In addition to Rodríguez, theorists such as Angela Davis, Robin D. G. Kelley, George Lipsitz, and Joel Olson have all pointed to Du Bois's account of Abolition Democracy to describe an open-ended project of building a world in which black liberation would be positively assured beyond the negative freedom of nineteenth-century emancipation from chattel slavery.

Du Bois introduces the term *Abolition Democracy* in *Black Reconstruction*, his materialist history of the twenty-year period following the Civil War, spanning from 1860 to 1880. The political theorist Cedric Robinson—one of the most careful analysts of historical and conceptual connections between race and capitalism—notes that in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois describes US chattel slavery as "a particular historical development of capitalism organizing the exploitation of the surplus value of labor of African-American works. It was a *sub-system* of world capitalism."<sup>14</sup> Du Bois demonstrates how the abolition of slavery had both a "negative" form (the release from bondage) and a "positive" form (the building of institutions, practices, and resources necessary for Black freedom).<sup>15</sup> Yet the project of positive abolition was short lived. Had the ongoing positive emancipation of Black workers continued, there would have been a radical reorganization and transformation not only of political life (including, but not limited to, meaningful political enfranchisement) but also of economic and social life.

As Robinson notes, drawing heavily on Du Bois's analysis, modern capitalism was made possible by the integration of the Black *worker* into the industrial economy through slavery and *then* remade by "the dismantling and destruction of the 'dictatorship of labor' established in the southern U.S. during the Reconstruction."<sup>16</sup> The failure to maintain the Abolition Democracy and its program of institution building and economic transformation for the sake of Black liberation also produced a "new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor."<sup>17</sup> As Robin Kelley reminds us, Du Bois's account shows us how momentary spaces of positive Black liberation across the South were dismantled, through a *consensus* between liberal and conservative whites. As the political theorist Joel Olson describes this moment in his own reading of Du Bois, the "cross-class alliance" that was forged between would-be-white workers and the capitalist classes—who sought to continue to exploit labor (southern and northern) at the expense of Black workers, "white" workers, and cross-racial solidarity between all workers—would spell the end of "positive" emancipation.<sup>18</sup> By 1876, whatever gains had been achieved under the period of Abolition Democracy gave way instead to what Du Bois called the "splendid failure" of emancipation.<sup>19</sup>

Of those who have invoked Du Bois's term, it is primarily the philosopher and prison abolitionist Angela Davis who has popularized Abolition Democracy as a *framework* for analysis. In her *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons and Torture*, Davis offers an account of the post-9/11 connections between the so-called war on terror as prosecuted by (and within) the United States and the far longer histories of incarceration, detention, and bodily torture practiced by (and within) the United States. Building on her earlier studies of the racialized nature of incarceration and "criminal" punishment in the United States, Davis links the end of chattel slavery in the nineteenth century directly to the use of prisons in the postbellum era. These historical and functional connections between slavery and the US criminal punishment system have become widely known in recent years in both academic and popular circles. Popular frameworks and terms such as the "prison-industrial-complex," "mass incarceration," or "the new Jim Crow" have purchase in a variety of political spaces (even if they are often poorly articulated and misunderstood). Yet each of these terms point to how "the prison" is a location of *ongoing* crisis, of *persistent* racial and gender subordination, and also an object of necessary "reform." The question, of course, is if the prison (or any object of critique) can be "reformed" without attending to the underlying practices that produced it.

The moment when calls for "reform" of a practice or institution appear as intelligible is where the work of problem definition has *ceased* rather than begun. And this is why it is so important that Davis invokes Du Bois's notion of "Abolition Democracy" as a *framework* for understanding "the prison" not merely as a place, but as a way of thinking about broader carceral practices of torture, confinement, and racialized and gendered subjugation. She repeats Du

Bois's fundamental insight of *Black Reconstruction*—that slavery was only negatively abolished by 1865 and that “comprehensive” abolition was never realized—and reads that argument forward into two subsequent abolitionist movements in the United States: death penalty abolition and prison abolition. As Davis writes, “In order to achieve the *comprehensive* abolition of slavery—after the institution was rendered illegal and black people were released from their chains—new institutions should have been created to incorporate black people into the social order.”<sup>20</sup> Just as the negative dismantling of chattel slavery was incomplete without corresponding institutions and practices of freedom were a productive failure, the mere ends of execution and of caging, absent the creation of new social, economic, and political institutions designed to emancipate those persons criminalized by the state, will likewise be a continuing of this failure. Davis continues:

In thinking specifically about the abolition of prisons *using the approach of abolition democracy*, we would propose the creation of an array of social institutions that would begin to solve the social problems that set people on the track to the prison, thereby helping to render the prison obsolete. There is a direct connection with slavery: when slavery was abolished [negatively], black people were set free, but they lacked access to the material resources that would enable them to fashion new, free lives. Prisons have thrived over the last century precisely because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery.<sup>21</sup>

For Davis, Abolition Democracy is not merely a period in US history, but also an “approach” for critical analysis. As a framework, Abolition Democracy is a dialectical understanding of how the achievement of meaningful freedom requires building new institutions in and through the abolition of old ones. By acknowledging the negative and positive aspects of abolition as an ongoing movement toward a new horizon, Davis indicates that the “how” of abolition matters a great deal. For instance, as Davis notes, if you think about death penalty abolition in isolation from prison abolition, it becomes possible to endorse an expansion of the prison as a way to “abolish” the death penalty: using life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) in place of “death.” But the trading of one “death” (execution) for “life” (LWOP) is not an abolition worthy of the name, but rather a splendid failure. Not only does such an “abolition” fail to end death (it trades one mode of death for another: execution for death in prison), it also reinforces the practice of punitive confinement and the logic of the “unredeemable offender.” Nevertheless, life without parole sentencing is routinely offered as a part of “abolishing” or “ending” the death penalty and as politically “pragmatic” by many anti-death penalty activists in the United States. It is here that a more radical abolition, a more thoroughgoing critique,

and a vision of the ongoing project of freedom are necessary to resist the lure of mere “reform.”

Abolition Democracy offers a critical *framework* of analysis, in which the analysis of one problem (the death penalty) is traced through its relation to other concrete problems, historically, genealogically, and theoretically (from the death penalty to incarceration and from incarceration to racialized criminality). Thus, it also provides a different appraisal of the situation at hand (noting that death penalty abolition cannot be achieved without keeping the horizon of prison abolition in mind). This is to embrace what the criminologist Thomas Mathiesen calls “unfinished solutions” as part of the ongoing dialectical process of abolitionist politics. Unfinished solutions are those in which an “alternative” to current practices and conditions is *never* offered as complete or definitive. As the theorist and legal scholar Allegra McLeod explains, turning to partial and unfinished solutions to existing unjust social practices thought to be “necessary” opens a space of (im)possibility, “because it is not possible to generate an alternative that is truly and utterly distinct from the status quo as our imaginations are constrained by our existing social arrangements. The unfinished alternative emerges when we refuse ‘to remain silent concerning that which we cannot talk about.’”<sup>22</sup> McLeod’s reworking of Mathiesen shows that abolition offers ways of talking about living with others that acknowledge that work as a necessarily ongoing and open-ended project. The desire for closure and finality interrupts this project as part of the violence of the state.

Figured in this way—not merely as a historical period of comprehensive abolition, but also as a framework for critical analysis of interlocking problems—Abolition Democracy names an ongoing, dialectical, and fugitive project of mutual liberation. It escapes our grasp, yes, but it does so by pointing toward a democratically conceived horizon in which, as abolitionists frequently insist, no one is disposable. It is an inherently *critical* project, refusing to point to a fixed reference point, teleological end, or finished solution. As such, Abolition Democracy operates always in relation to both the world as it *has become* and the world that is *otherwise*. Even while deeply materialist, it is also a project to expand our political imagination. It theorizes what might become possible and takes particular interest, therefore, in those things that are thought to be impossible. Abolition Democracy reveals that those practices, configurations of political life, and lives themselves taken as impossible are in fact already present, vibrant sources for collective mobilization.<sup>23</sup> Such a reversal of terms demonstrates the simultaneously critical and pragmatic thrust of the abolitionist imperative, as Lorde puts it in this section’s epigraph: we must alter the oppressive institutions at the same time as we find ways to survive within them. Such an approach is anything but purely theoretical or abstract, even as it pushes us to think expansively and in seemingly impossible terms. Abolitionist critique

and the movement for Abolition Democracy take the negativity of abolition as a motivating force for positive political, social, and interpersonal action.

## Abolitionist Action

*Abolition means, fundamentally, the returning of resources, not their revoking. Taking away police and prisons is meaningless if they are not replaced with the resources that prevent violence—housing, healthcare, mental health services, public education, nutritious food, transportation, etc. When we say “abolition,” we are talking about taking back the resources that have been extracted from our communities and funneled towards their militarization. We are talking about reclaiming them, and channeling them into the options and opportunities that make our communities healthier, happier and stronger. This is the safety we seek. Police and prisons have nothing to do with it.*

—Benji Hart

The “prison” and the “police” are not simply given or natural. If they appear to be, this is because they have *become* naturalized in a particular form and with an identifiable material history and thus appear to be given. And as Benji Hart notes in the epigraph, police and prisons are supported by an extensive set of resources that could be used otherwise. Often, the specific skepticism (and sometimes hostility and outright dismissal) directed toward abolitionist projects focuses on the notion that abolition will require far more resources than are currently available: abolition is figured as impossible *because* it is impractical. Marginal reform of prison conditions and police practices, it is therefore argued, is all that is possible. And the ongoing crises of police and prison legitimacy or efficiency, the logic continues, open a political opportunity for such marginal reform, restoring these “natural” institutions to their equilibria. The question of a broader redistribution of resources and power that would be implied by shuttering the jails or disbanding the police is taken off the table.

But what almost always underlies the reformist position hostile to abolition are two unstated assumptions: first, that the current state of affairs is largely just and only in need of marginal adjustment to return to “normal”; and second, that the harms of the police and prison are exceptions to their normal operation. The granting of these assumptions is *how* the naturalization of the prison and the police take place. As a radical critique, however, abolition takes on these assumptions directly in the concrete terms of safety and community health and strength. First, the current state of affairs is far from just or near some kind of equilibrium. Maintenance of the current state of affairs in fact

requires constantly expanding economic, political, and affective resources. Consider, for instance, the portion of the state and local budgets that goes toward policing and prisons, expanding persistently over the last forty years. These are resources, as Hart notes, that can go elsewhere. Second, abolitionist organizing does not take the harms of the “prison” or the police as exceptions to the normal operation of the state’s use of violence, or as evidence of a merely dysfunctional system. Rather, this violence is exemplary and integral to the state’s genocidal, colonial, and hetero-normative project of white supremacy (itself a political project of hierarchical rule). Abolitionist organizers ask: What if the prison isn’t broken at all? What if it is working exactly like it is supposed to?

Abolitionist critique thus offers a far more realistic account of the enormous costs—in lives, talent, treasure, time, and energy—of keeping things the way they currently are. Reformers, on the other hand, steeped in economicist cost-benefit analysis, often measure welfare gains and losses within the term of marginal analysis. But this approach places the current state of affairs at an imagined “zero” point against which proposals either increase or decrease social welfare in relation to that point. The effect, however, is that the status quo becomes normalized as neutral, rather than what a more realistic accounting ought to tell us: we live within a deeply stratified and massively unequal world in which a huge number of people (if not most people) must *survive* within an oppressive, dominating, and unjust society. The *starting* point of an abolitionist perspective is that the current state of affairs is in fact *intolerable* and must be dismantled, rebuilt, and transformed in order to help communities survive and flourish. It is, in this sense, already in the tradition of nonideal theory, material rather than abstract, historical rather than counterfactual.

While “abolition” (as a theoretical framework and object of analysis) has found a marginal home in the academy, its primary location is practical, as a framework for social and political organizing. Abolition functions *as an approach to organizing* as much as a goal to be realized by abolitionists. Many abolitionist organizations in the United States organize around specific issues or public services besides the police and prisons and do so in an abolitionist manner. As the prison abolitionist Rose Braz puts it: “Abolition defines both the end goal we seek and the way we do our work today. Abolition means a world where we do not use prisons, policing, and the larger system of the prison industrial complex as an ‘answer’ to what are social, political, and economics problems. Abolition is not just an end goal but a strategy today.”<sup>24</sup>

This is what Allegra McLeod identifies as the “abolitionist ethic.” As McLeod puts it, the abolitionist ethic is a “moral orientation . . . committed to ending the practice of confining people in cages and eliminating the control of human beings through imminently threatened police use of violent force.”<sup>25</sup> This ethic can be deployed in nearly any political movement as a principle of agreement among members of how to pursue their aims.

Abolitionist organizing under such an ethic recognizes that “the prison” (as both an abstract form and a very real and material place of confinement and suffering) and “the police” have become deeply integrated into social and political projects that *ought* to be antithetical to them. This can be seen immediately in the rise of carceral “solutions” to problems such as drug abuse, sexual and gender-based violence, reproductive health, homelessness, or mental health. Movement organizations have thus rightly taken up an abolitionist ethic to reject the use of state violence as providing such solutions. For instance, organizations like the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), Survived and Punished, generationFIVE, and Southerners on a New Ground (SONG) all function as abolitionist movement organizations (in that they seek prison and police abolition as well as organizing in an abolitionist way, building coalitions without relying on the violence of the state), but at the same time, they do specific service work and mobilization that may not appear to be directly about prisons or the police.

For example, the BYP100, an outgrowth of the Black Youth Project at the University of Chicago (a long-term research project founded by Cathy Cohen) describes itself as a “member-based organization of Black youth activists creating justice and freedom for all Black people.” Founded in 2013 in the immediate aftermath of the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin, the BYP100 works across a broad set of policy items, organized (most recently) around a model of divestment/investment. They call for the mass (and immediate) divestment from institutions and practices that reduce the life chances of Black youth (and all Black people) and a corresponding reinvestment in “Black futures.” Addressing the violence of policing (especially in Chicago, following the murder of Laquan McDonald by Officer Jason Van Dyke of the Chicago Police Department in 2014), the BYP100 organized a campaign to defund police departments across the nation and redirect those funds into housing, education, jobs, and healthcare for Black people. They expressly identify themselves as abolitionists, writing: “As an abolitionist organization that seeks to dismantle current systems of policing, incarceration, and punishment, BYP100 has always been committed to directly confronting police power.”<sup>26</sup> What is telling—beyond the organization’s incredible success in changing policy conversations, forcing politicians out of office (including both a district attorney and possibly the mayor of Chicago), and redirecting the goals of Black politics (especially in Chicago)—is the way in which the organization understands abolitionist politics as part and parcel with their wider project of building Black futures and collective liberation for all people.<sup>27</sup>

While one may have to search for the express language of “abolition” in the self-descriptions of organizations like those noted earlier, they are exemplary (rather than exceptional) abolitionist critics of the status quo in the work that they take up. This is because the *action* of abolitionist critique (as perhaps

distinct but inseparable from abolitionist *ethics*) focuses on the institutions of the police and prisons, but never in insolation from other social and political spaces. Following the broader framework of Abolition Democracy, in which institutions and practices are always understood as produced by a material history of struggle, abolitionist critique focuses on questioning and confronting the conditions of possibility of the police and prisons. Contrary to reformist positions that presume that the crises of police violence or mass incarceration are the products of only the current conditions (and thus reformable), abolitionist critique reads the prison and police as both produced by *and reproducing* the historically determined conditions. Thus, positive building and negative dismantling always move together within abolitionist critique. And an abolitionist political agenda seeks to build the world in which prisons and police would be rendered *impossible* because the functions they serve would be made *obsolete* (as Angela Davis puts it). It seeks to build the world in which the state’s use of violence is not granted the status of a “solution” to a problem but rather is understood as a problem itself.

Abolitionist movement organizations thus do not limit themselves to narrow understandings of the police or prisons as institutions in isolation from broadly social and political organization. Rather, they may *appear* to not be *primarily* focused on prison and police abolition and to not incorporate abolitionist principles into their practice. Yet, by virtue of being an essentially open-ended political project (directed toward horizons rather than static ends), these organizations practice abolition as *critical* in form and practice. Surveying what abolitionists *do*, Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein write: “Abolitionists have worked to end solitary confinement and the death penalty, stop the construction of new prisons, eradicate cash bail, organized to free people from prison, opposed the expansion of punishment through hate crime laws and surveillance, pushed for universal health care, and developed alternative modes of conflict resolution that do not rely on the criminal punishment system.”<sup>28</sup>

That is to say, perhaps the most important way that an abolitionist critical framework connects the practical and theoretical is in its practices of mobilization.

### Critical Resistance

*No matter what your approach or political leanings, one thing should stand out: if we’re imagining that a world without prisons is going to look like the world we live in now, we aren’t really imagining abolition.*

—The Critical Resistance Abolitionist Toolkit

Abolitionist critique is both a powerful mode of critical analysis and a mobilizer of political action. It is especially suited to this moment of punctuated crisis within an ongoing crisis. While some of the organizations discussed earlier articulate their abolitionist critique implicitly through a shared background commitment (to abolish the prison or the police) and through methods of organizing that refuse to enlist the help of the state, some important abolitionist organizations explicitly identify their *primary* goal as the abolition of the prison itself and organize expressly around that project. One of the best known of these organizations is Critical Resistance (CR).

Founded in 1997 as a nonhierarchical collective dedicated to the abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex (the PIC), Critical Resistance is one of the most important abolitionist organizations in the United States. Based out of their national office in Oakland (and with regional chapters in Los Angeles, New York, and Portland), Critical Resistance has an open membership structure, a professional organizing staff, and an advisory board that includes activists, organizers, and scholars. They work on a wide variety of specific projects, including open meetings focused on political education, letter-writing campaigns, publishing a newspaper with incarcerated members called the *Abolitionist*, producing books and videos for organizing use, supporting other abolitionist campaigns with direct material resources, and organizing national conferences. Ari Wohlfeiler (an early member of Critical Resistance) summarizes the breadth of this work and its central organizing point: "We've worked to meet the PIC at every point: anti-expansion work, reading groups, legal services, parties, radio shows, copwatching, lobbying, political education, publishing, grassroots fundraising, bodywork and healing projects, letter writing with prisoners, housing and environmental justice organizing."<sup>29</sup>

Critical Resistance's mission statement is instructive in both its form and its content. It is a straightforward declaration of their opposition to the prison industrial complex as well as the deeper underlying beliefs, practices, and mentalities that support prisons and all forms of "caging":

Critical Resistance seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex [PIC] by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. We believe that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make our communities secure. As such, our work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. The success of the movement requires that it reflect communities most affected by the PIC. Because we seek to abolish the PIC, we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.

First, CR identifies itself as focused on building a movement, to which policy change is subordinate. The work is immediately practical organizing work,

directed toward its stated goal: to end the Prison Industrial Complex. And this goal—abolishing the PIC—is defined in specifically critical terms: challenging widespread ideological beliefs that a set of particular practices (caging and controlling people) produces a desired outcome (safety). CR thus offers an alternative definition of how safety is produced (through the provision of food, shelter, and freedom, all defined as *basic necessities*). The unstated implication of this redefinition rests on the material claim that many communities lack these basic necessities, specifically those whose inequality and powerlessness are produced by the functioning of the PIC. At each level of this statement, then, CR engages in a kind of ideology critique, operating not merely on the level of policy or legal change, but also at the level of beliefs and ideological attachments that support those policies and laws. Most importantly, the mission lays out two guiding organizing principles: (1) that "success" will be measured from the point of view of the most affected communities (i.e., that the criteria for what counts as a win will not be offered by those who benefit from the PIC), and (2) that any policy, project, or proposal that CR will support will be empirically tested against supporting the "life or scope" of the PIC.

Even in this brief statement, the hallmarks of critique (beginning in material rather than abstract considerations, as normatively situated reflection, and based in the needs of those most effected by a concrete political problem) are apparent. The relatively abstract terms of analysis are grounded in an awareness of the material (and global) conditions of inequality and powerlessness, in the lack of basic necessities (which include *freedom* as a fundamental human need), and in the straightforward redefinition of the dominant terms of analysis (safety) and a stated understanding that the PIC reflects a broader set of concerns that are global in nature (and, we can infer, that are historical as well, in that they see the PIC as a particular manifestation of a much longer history and larger set of political crises of domination and subjugation). Moreover, it follows Tyson's definition of critique offered earlier: CR looks to the apparent breakdown of the PIC, marked as a dysfunctional or "failed" institution: it is taken as a starting point, but then takes up that breakdown itself as a question, asking not how the institution has "failed" but rather how its constitutive terms (safety, harm, freedom, and the like) underlie how we define failure.

Critical Resistance is perhaps best known for a joint statement in 2001 published with INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.<sup>30</sup> INCITE!, a national organization which has a similar organizing model as CR, works to end violence against women of color through grassroots direct action. Their joint statement, *Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex*, has become canonical in critical carceral studies, gender studies, and critical race theory, and is a widely cited document that is both an artifact of the two organizations' practice and an ongoing organizing tool. It is important to emphasize here that a clean distinction between "texts" and "action" is difficult to sustain. CR and

INCITE! both engage in a wide variety of organizing practices, just one of which is the production of reflective texts. I turn to such texts here because they track—both in their production as collaboratively produced statements and in their rhetorical form—the blurring between theory and practice that I take to be essential to abolitionist critique (and critique more generally).

Written collectively by (primarily) women of color members of both organizations in 2001, the joint statement is a mutual “holding to account” of the two movements for their shared organizing failings. On the one hand the anti-prison movement had largely failed to take seriously the question of gender-based violence against women as central to its mission, and on the other hand, the movement to end sexual and gender-based violence against women had far too often relied on the violence of the state in ways that diminished rather than promoted the safety of marginalized people, women of color in particular. As the statement puts it: “We call social justice movements to develop strategies and analysis that address both state *and* interpersonal violence against women. Currently, activists/movements that address state violence (such as anti-prison, anti-police brutality groups) often work in isolation from activists/movements that address domestic and sexual violence” (21). Structured through a series of shared points of analysis, the joint statement thus operates both as a critical diagnosis of the contradictions between two radical movements and as itself a performance of solidarity between the two movements, collectively affirming their shared mission of creating meaningful safety for all people.

The statement itself moves through three sections. First, it takes on the anti-violence movement, noting five specific ways that movement’s reliance on the state’s use of violence (i.e., a reliance on law enforcement, criminalization, prisons, state-funding, and the criminal justice system) has diminished the safety of women (especially women of color) rather than supported it. In its second section, the statement takes on the mainstream antiprison movement, again noting five specific ways that movement has failed to account for the lives and experiences of those most vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence in its work (i.e., by rendering women invisible in their analyses, by not addressing everyday forms of harassment and sexual violence faced by women, by failing to attend to LGBTTI exposure to violence, by sidelining concerns about serial murder and rape, and by relying on “romanticized” notions of community in response to real concerns about safety held by survivors of sexual and domestic violence). These pointed and direct criticisms are then followed in the final section with eleven concrete steps for movement actors to take to address these contradictions between the two movements. The authors close with a statement of their goal: “We seek to build movements that not only end violence, but that create a society based on radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity. In this society, safety and security will not be premised on violence or the threat of violence; it will be based on a collective

commitment to guaranteeing the survival and care of all peoples” (25). The structure of the statement itself models a self-reflective and critical appraisal of organizing work, using opposing perspectives between the two movements’ failings as a new ground for listening and responding to each other. From this confrontation, a new coalition emerges for future organizing.

Reprinted in 2008 as part of CR’s *Abolition Now: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*, the statement is introduced with a genealogical account of its production, a brief statement of its reception and follow-up, and a series of open-ended questions through which to frame (re)readings in years to come. As the editors of the volume note, the original statement’s concrete steps and its open-ended call for action made it a powerful organizing tool. They write that these steps could allow “each movement . . . to transform the contradictory position between movements into a position of a *critically integrated politic*” (16). Rather than merely countering the shortcomings and failings of each movement, the work of the joint statement would be to *overcome* those contradictions in a way that produces a *new* political body. While circulated in advance of the conference in 2008, the inclusion of a series of concrete questions to guide discussion continues to serve this dialectical purpose even in the reprinting.

The use of such discussion questions is a hallmark of Critical Resistance’s (and INCITE!’s) approach to prison abolition, gender justice, and organizing for mutual liberation. Questions motivate both theoretical analysis and collective action. What might appear as merely a rhetorical presentational choice is itself part of the ongoing work of digging deeper, asking further critical questions, and engaging in an openly dialectical approach as part of the organizing work. As they self-reflectively note, “Radical social movements that we are building together are being challenged and pushed to incorporate critical and potentially movement-altering agendas and practices. Perhaps at the next ten-year anniversary, we will celebrate the ways in which these rich and transformative cross-movement collaborations have created unique and productive pathways towards liberation for us all” (21). Rather than bemoan the difficulty of strong critique from within its membership, the CR/INCITE! statement (in its multiple iterations) *celebrates* these challenges. This is because they believe that the organizing work of liberation emerges from within critical responses to their own shortcomings and contradictions between movements.

In addition to the questions that frame the reprinted CR/INCITE! statement, the *Critical Resistance Abolitionist Toolkit*—a freely available online PDF running over a hundred pages in length, designed expressly to facilitate understanding of the concept of prison abolition in order to organize individuals to take concrete action against the PIC—offers theoretical analyses in concert with questions intended to prompt conversations either between real people attending an abolitionist meeting or with oneself as an isolated reader. The questions

are pedagogical (helping to clarify concepts and definitions), substantive (forcing readers to confront their own assumptions, attachments, and beliefs), and practical (demanding concrete proposals for action, such as what one can do instead of calling the police during emergencies). Such questions, interspersed throughout accessible theoretical discussions, show how critical thinking takes place in dialog with others. And in that dialog, accountability and solidarity between people are directly built.

It is thus a hallmark of Critical Resistance's approach that it brings together both ruthless critique and mobilization. This pattern is discernable throughout their work. First, through deep connections to incarcerated people near local chapters or through their nationally circulated newspaper, the *Abolitionist*, CR organizes actions in direct support of incarcerated people. Theoretical and empirical analysis follows, framed and articulated through questioning specific policy proposals and strategies. The guiding principles of the mission direct their work—no strategies or proposals which extend the life or scope of the PIC are acceptable, and priority is given to the self-determination of those most affected by the PIC, namely, incarcerated people and their loved ones. The most important question—does this policy or project extend the life or scope of the PIC?—is asked persistently. As one CR organizer explained to me, this question is often phrased, "What happens if we win? Will we be fighting against what we asked for ten years from now?" And lastly, a confrontation with the extended reach of the PIC is organized and the process begins again. Because CR understands abolition both as a goal to be achieved (a world without prisons and police) and as a way of organizing, it produces the world that it seeks to build.

\* \* \*

*Which isn't to say liberals can't eventually come around to radical concepts like abolition. I was a liberal once. But it is to say that radicalism is an exorcism of liberalism, not an evolution of it.*

—Hari Ziyad

I've tried to show throughout this essay—moving from the question of the crisis, to the framework of Abolition Democracy in general, to the case of prison and police abolition in particular, grounded and reflected in a particular set of texts by an abolitionist organization—that we already possess resources necessary to counter the critique of critique and the current crisis of left-liberalism. It may be a practice of organizing that is unfamiliar to those of us who have not taken part in collaborative work, have not thought beyond legislative

policy or the ballot box, and whose imaginations of mass mobilization still reflect nostalgic memories of what direct action looked like before the rise of mass incarceration. And at this moment in particular, when we might rightly feel the need to abandon a ruthless critique of everything existing and when demands are issued to unify the "left" around liberal principles that leave systems of domination and oppression intact, we ought to resist that feeling and that demand. Now is the time to (re)commit to a radical stance and to an immoderate negation of those unjust institutions whose presence feels so natural that to oppose them seems impossible. And moreover, abolitionist politics as critique offers a powerful resource in this moment: it is a way of organizing and mobilizing people. It is a framework *and* practice of critical thinking and engagement with the world, analyzing, appraising, and confronting concrete political problems faced by marginalized and oppressed people. And it has been well known for generations. Far from leading us into a dead end of political paralysis, abolition as it has been theorized by its practitioners brings together critique and mobilization by democratizing both.

It is worth returning to the *democratic* force of the historic Abolition Democracy. Even limited as it was (especially by gender and disability), the period of Abolition Democracy documented by Du Bois was radical because it moved the polity toward a truer, deeper, and more meaningful democratic practice. More than mere inclusion of formerly enslaved people into the polity on given terms, it was necessarily a reconfiguration of those terms itself. It was a period in which the emancipation of black workers entailed political and economic enfranchisement and a rejection of domination in all its forms. It was a period of self-rule, the sort of which has rarely been seen in the history the enlightenment. This is because the promise and force of Abolition Democracy were in the work of building it, not in spite of its being *impossible, impractical*, and *excessively critical*, but *because* it was.

Abolitionist critique teaches us that the work of prison and political abolition, while surely directed toward the horizon of a world without prisons or police, *is in the building* of communities of safety, mutual accountability, and shared liberation. It is in the democratic building of democracy. Even as there is a goal in mind, the pursuit of that goal on abolitionist terms is also disruptive of the very terms of political success. It is, in this sense, an insurgency from within. Because abolitionist critique is a form of concrete political action, organizing people to confront concrete political problems as the work of politics, it is the work of negative and positive transformation.

Abolitionist critique offers us an alternative to the seduction of retrenched liberalism and reformism, especially when the temptation of retrenchment is heightened by the crises of the particular moment. But precisely in such moments, immoderate and insurgent political action is more necessary than ever. And

while we may worry that radical critique asks too much or risks demoralizing political agents, the tradition of abolitionist political action and theory shows us that such worries can be addressed, and that another way has already been possible. Because abolitionist critique demands that we directly confront and challenge white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and contemporary fascism, it both acknowledges the ongoing crisis and is a bulwark against the crisis at hand. It is the transformation of the current world through the building of a new world.

## Notes

1. Kelley, "Trump Says Go Back, We Say Fight Back," *Boston Review*, November 15, 2016, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/after-trump/robin-d-g-kelley-trump-says-go-back-we-say-fight-back>; Kelley, "Births of a Nation," *Boston Review*, March 6, 2017, <https://bostonreview.net/race-politics/robin-d-g-kelley-births-nation>; Kelley, "One Year Later," *Boston Review*, November 8, 2017, <https://bostonreview.net/race-politics/robin-d-g-kelley-one-year-later>.
2. Kelley, "Trump Says Go Back, We Say Fight Back."
3. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.
4. Kelley, "One Year Later."
5. Kelley, "Trumpism and the Crisis of the Left."
6. Kelley, "Births of a Nation."
7. Kelley.
8. Kelley.
9. This particular accusation comes from a widely circulated article by Rebecca Solnit from 2012, in which she argues that criticism within the left itself is a source of political demobilization. Rebecca Solnit, "Rain on Our Parade: A Letter to the Dismal Left," *Common Dreams*, September 27, 2012, [www.commondreams.org/views/2012/09/27/rain-our-parade-letter-dismal-left](http://www.commondreams.org/views/2012/09/27/rain-our-parade-letter-dismal-left).
10. I am hardly the first person to make direct connections between abolitionist politics and the traditions of critical theory and critique. For just a set of sources that make this connection explicit see Che Gossett, "Abolitionist Imaginings: A Conversation with Bo Brown, Reina Gossett, and Dylan Rodriguez," in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, 323–42 (Oakland, CA: AK, 2011); Liat Ben-Moshe, Che Gossett, Nick Mitchell, and Eric A. Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture," in *Death and Other Penalties: Philosophy in a Time of Mass Incarceration*, ed. Geoffrey Adelsberg, Lisa Guenther, and Scott Zeman, 266–95 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
11. See F. Moten and S. Harney, "Policy and Planning," *Social Text* 27, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 182–87, 183.
12. Personal correspondence, June 1, 2018.
13. Liz Samuels and David Stein, eds., "Perspectives on Critical Resistance," in *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*, 1–14 (Oakland, CA: AK, 2008), 8.
14. Cedric Robinson, "A Critique of W. E. B. Du Bois' Black Reconstruction," *Black Scholar* 8, no. 7 (May 1977): 44–50, 45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1977.11413913>.
15. On Du Bois's distinction between "positive" and "negative" abolitionists in the nineteenth century, see Jasmine Noelle Yarish, "If I Die In Police Custody: Neo-Abolitionism, New Social Media, and Queering the Politics of Respectability," *National Political Science Review* 19, no. 2 (2018).
16. Robinson, "A Critique of W. E. B. Du Bois' Black Reconstruction," 46.
17. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part of Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 566; Robinson, "A Critique of W. E. B. Du Bois' Black Reconstruction," 46.
18. Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
19. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 633.
20. Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories, 2005), 95.
21. Davis, 96–97, emphasis added.
22. Allegra M. McLeod, "Confronting Criminal Law's Violence: The Possibilities of Unfinished Alternatives," *Harvard Unbound* 8 (2013): 109–32, 121, citing Mathiesen.
23. For instance, consider the rhetoric and action of queer and trans prison abolitionists, such as Reina Gossett and Dean Spade, who have recently argued for an embrace of the impossible and building a movement of nobodies (rather than accept the neoliberal framing that everybody is somebody). Reina Gossett, "Commencement Address at Hampshire College," *Reina Gossett* (blog), May 17, 2016, [www.reinagossett.com/commencement-address-hampshire-college/](http://www.reinagossett.com/commencement-address-hampshire-college/); Sarah Lazare, "Now Is the Time for 'Nobodies': Dean Spade on Mutual Aid and Resistance in the Trump Era," *AlterNet*, January 9, 2017, [www.alternet.org/activism/now-time-nobodies-dean-spade-mutual-aid-and-resistance-trump-era](http://www.alternet.org/activism/now-time-nobodies-dean-spade-mutual-aid-and-resistance-trump-era).
24. Samuels and Stein, "Perspectives on Critical Resistance," 11.
25. McLeod, "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice," *UCLA Law Review* 62 (2015): 1156–239, 1161–62.
26. BYP100, "Our Impact," BYP100, <https://byp100.org/our-impact-2/>.
27. For an excellent account of the formation of the BYP100 and its abolitionist grounding, see Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).
28. Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein, "What Abolitionists Do," *Jacobin*, August 24, 2017, <http://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/prison-abolition-reform-mass-incarceration>.
29. Samuels and Stein, "Perspectives on Critical Resistance," 5.
30. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance, "The Critical Resistance INCITE! Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex," in *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*, by the CR10 Publications Collective, 15–29. Oakland, CA: AK, 2008. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

## Bibliography

Ben-Moshe, Liat, Che Gossett, Nick Mitchell, and Eric A. Stanley. "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture." In *Death and Other Penalties: Philosophy in a Time*

- of *Mass Incarceration*, edited by Geoffrey Adelsberg, Lisa Guenther, and Scott Zeman, 266–95. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.
- Berger, Dan, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein. "What Abolitionists Do." *Jacobin*, August 24, 2017, <http://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/prison-abolition-reform-mass-incarceration>.
- BYP100. "Our Impact." BYP100, <https://byp100.org/our-impact-2/>.
- Davis, Angela. *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*. New York: Seven Stories, 2005.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part of Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2012.
- Gossett, Che. "Abolitionist Imaginings: A Conversation with Bo Brown, Reina Gossett, and Dylan Rodríguez." In *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, edited by Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, 323–42. Oakland, CA: AK, 2011.
- Gossett, Reina. "Commencement Address at Hampshire College." *Reina Gossett* (blog), May 17, 2016, [www.reinagossett.com/commencement-address-hampshire-college/](http://www.reinagossett.com/commencement-address-hampshire-college/).
- Hart, Benji. "To Fight for Black Lives Is to Be Anti-Police." *Radical Faggot* (blog), July 21, 2016, <https://radfag.com/2016/07/21/to-fight-for-black-lives-is-to-be-anti-police/>.
- INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance. "The Critical Resistance INCITE! Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex." In *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*, by the CR10 Publications Collective, 15–29. Oakland, CA: AK, 2008.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. "Births of a Nation." *Boston Review*, March 6, 2017, <https://bostonreview.net/race-politics/robin-d-g-kelley-births-nation>.
- . "One Year Later." *Boston Review*, November 8, 2017, <https://bostonreview.net/race-politics/robin-d-g-kelley-one-year-later>.
- . "Trumpism and the Crisis of the Left." Plenary presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, September 1, 2017.
- . "Trump Says Go Back, We Say Fight Back." *Boston Review*, November 15, 2016, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/after-trump/robin-d-g-kelley-trump-says-go-back-we-say-fight-back>.
- Lazare, Sarah. "Now Is the Time for 'Nobodies': Dean Spade on Mutual Aid and Resistance in the Trump Era." *AlterNet*, January 9, 2017, [www.alternet.org/activism/now-time-nobodies-dean-spade-mutual-aid-and-resistance-trump-era](http://www.alternet.org/activism/now-time-nobodies-dean-spade-mutual-aid-and-resistance-trump-era).
- Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." In *Zami; Sister Outsider; Undersong*, 114–23. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993.
- McLeod, Allegra M. "Confronting Criminal Law's Violence: The Possibilities of Unfinished Alternatives." *Harvard Unbound* 8 (2013): 109–32.
- . "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice." *UCLA Law Review* 62 (2015): 1156–239.
- Mills, Charles W. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Moten, F., and S. Harney. "Policy and Planning." *Social Text* 27, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 182–87.
- Olson, Joel. *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Ransby, Barbara. *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018.
- Robinson, Cedric. "A Critique of W. E. B. Du Bois' Black Reconstruction." *Black Scholar* 8, no. 7 (May 1977): 44–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1977.11413913>.
- Samuels, Liz, and David Stein, eds. "Perspectives on Critical Resistance." In *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*, 1–14. Oakland, CA: AK, 2008.

- Solnit, Rebecca. "Rain on Our Parade: A Letter to the Dismal Left." *Common Dreams*, September 27, 2012, [www.commondreams.org/views/2012/09/27/rain-our-parade-letter-dismal-left](http://www.commondreams.org/views/2012/09/27/rain-our-parade-letter-dismal-left).
- Yarish, Jasmine Noelle. "#IfIDieInPoliceCustody: Neo-Abolitionism, New Social Media, and Queering the Politics of Respectability." *National Political Science Review* 19, no. 2 (2018).
- Ziyad, Hari. "What I Was Trying to Get at Is That All of The . . ." Facebook, October 12, 2017, [www.facebook.com/hziyad/posts/10155848345136934](https://www.facebook.com/hziyad/posts/10155848345136934).