Dear Comrades

A lot has happened since we sent you Volume 1. Following the murder of George Floyd, Minneapolis erupted in protest and set off an international uprising against state violence. Millions of people have been in the streets, demanding an end to policing and punishment, celebrating Black life and mourning those lost to white supremacist violence. The ideas that ground abolition are spreading faster than ever, and have inspired countless new people to envision a world without prisons. We are on the move!

At the same time, reformism has slithered in, led by elected officials and non-profits. They tell protestors to be quiet, they tell Black people to wait for justice. They tell everyone to be patient, and to accept the small insignificant “gains” they’re lobbying for. Now, it is especially vital for us to insist on our demands and make no concessions. We have to be able to tell the difference between abolition and reform, and we have to believe in the power of the people to self-organize, to fight for their own liberation, and to win the world we want.

During all of this, COVID-19 continues to spread and kill people every day. Following “re-opening” in certain states, the virus is surging again. Businesses like restaurants open up, putting workers and their communities at extreme risk while the bosses kick back in their apartments and summer homes, happy to have profit streams rolling back in. The class lines, too, are becoming clearer by the day.

And as you know, many jails and prisons have continued to be hotbeds. Between the virus and the lockdowns used to slow the spread, COVID-19 has made prisons even more repressive and dangerous. We hope that you’ve been able to stay as safe and as healthy as possible. We hope that Volume 2 will help pass the time.

In this volume, we present your many powerful submissions and we look especially towards Black August and abolition on the ground.

We cannot thank you enough for your letters of encouragement, gratitude and love. Please keep writing us! Keep submitting your beautiful work. Keep sending your suggestions and feedback. If someone on your block is interested in the journal, send us their address and we’ll add them. We hope you’ll be able to read these words together, discuss them, and build connections through study and dialogue. Yours in struggle.

In The Belly Journal
PO Box 67
Ithaca, NY 14851

P.S.: Last issue, we published a drawing of Audre Lorde with her famous statement that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” but we did not know who the artist was. Since then, we learned that it was created by the artist Katy Groves. Thanks to Mariame Kaba for reading and letting us know!
Let’s Not Go Back To Normal

by Stephen Wilson

As the world struggles with COVID-19, populations that are usually invisibilized and ignored find themselves part of the conversation. From the working poor who suddenly find themselves deemed “essential” to the residents of nursing homes, people who mainstream media rarely focuses on have become news. Prisoners, too, have found themselves being mentioned in the news. The plight of prisoners and detainees, through the advocacy of family, friends and supporters, is finally mainstream newsworthy.

Over two million people are locked away behind walls and fences in environments wholly unprepared to protect them from COVID-19 or treat them if they fall ill. In Pennsylvania, the DOC has only four ventilators. The state prison population is over 47,000.

The families, friends and supporters of prisoners and detainees have pressed local, state and federal officials to release people from prisons and jails, citing the heightened risk prisoners and detainees face. Prisoners cannot practice social distancing. Many of us live double-celled, and we often find ourselves herded from place to place. Moreover, the privately-owned medical providers that run most prison and jail medical departments are notorious for subquality healthcare. They are out to make a buck, not save lives or prevent illness.

There are many people locked in cages across this country who suffer from illnesses that make them high-risk should COVID-19 get inside a prison or jail. Moreover, the elderly population, a group most susceptible to COVID-19, is the fastest growing subpopulation behind the walls. These facts created a sense of urgency among the supporters of prisoners.

The efforts of families, friends and supporters of prisoners have paid off. All across the country, people were released from custody. Jails freed people unable to post money bail. Technical violaters were released. Early parole was granted. Those awaiting board actions were swiftly granted parole. Prisoners with compromised immune systems and underlying health conditions were released. Police stopped arresting folks. In Pennsylvania, the governor used his reprieve powers to grant release to 1,500 state prisoners. Finally, decarceration is in effect.

It is sad that it took this pandemic to move our elected officials to do what we have been saying for years could and should be done. The two main drivers of mass incarceration have been more arrests (hyper-criminalization) and longer sentences. The only way to significantly reduce incarceration is to reverse these drivers. We have to decriminalize and decarcerate.

For decades, abolitionists have argued that we can safely release people from prison. We know about the graying of the prison population. We also know that this subpopulation has the lowest recidivism rates of any offender group. Why are we keeping the elderly locked up? Especially when we know that the costs of caging an elderly person is two to three times more than caging younger people. For years, groups like R.A.P.P. have been advocating for the release of elderly prisoners. It took a pandemic for elected officials to finally listen.

All across the country, there are groups fighting against money bail. People are forced to sit in jail, not because they have been convicted of a crime, but because they are poor. Poor folk, especially poor people of color, are entered into ridiculous bails. Amounts they could never afford to pay. The result is crowded county jails. Many people are coerced into taking plea deals just to escape jail. This pandemic forced counties to release people without money bails or through significantly reduced bails. The county jails know full well they are unprepared to deal with COVID-19. Their hands were forced. And equity finally entered into the equation.

Thousands of people have been released from
custody. They are with their families, friends and supporters, working to adjust to society again. But this isn't the time for us to rest on our laurels. We need to be even more vigilant now. Why? First, the prisons and jails are still crowded. Mass incarceration hasn't ended. The cages are still full. So the fight must continue. Second, what is given can be taken back. In Pennsylvania, Gov. Wolf used his reprieve power to release folks. He could at any moment rescind that order. We need to make sure that those who were released are not brought back inside. We need to fight to enshrine the changes that have occurred. Elderly prisoners need to be released. Money bail should be eliminated. Parole should be presumptive. Early parole should be re instituted. We cannot be fooled into thinking we have won permanent changes. This is a time of emergency. And when things start to return to normal, there will be forces that will want to return to caging others to deal with harm. We must fight this return to the norm.

Prisons are always dangerous places, not just during pandemics. They can never and will never create safety. What we have seen is decarceration can happen when enough fire is put under officials. We must keep that fire lit. We must strengthen the connections we have made during this time. We must connect with the families and friends of incarcerated folks and support efforts to bring everyone home. We haven't created a world without cages yet. But we have taken major steps in that direction. Let's not go backwards.

Prison in a Pandemic
by Max

As the world goes through a painful process of sheltering in place, I thought it might be useful to offer an inside view of what the novel coronavirus experience is like in U.S. prisons and jails. You might guess that it’s “the same, but worse” than on the outside — but in a lot of ways, it’s more complex than that.

First, I want to say that even as an incarcerated person, I’m writing from a position of relative privilege. I’m a U.S. federal prisoner, whereas the vast majority of prisoners in the United States are in state prisons and county jails, where conditions have deteriorated much more rapidly. Nor are most U.S. prisoners in the situation of some incarcerated folks in other parts of the world, who have been left completely abandoned and exposed.

I’m a relatively young, generally healthy, white man, with all the systemic advantages that go along with those qualities. And as of this writing (April 13, 2020), this particular facility has no cases of coronavirus—staff or prisoners. That said, located near Seattle, site of the first major U.S. outbreak, we have been under epidemic restrictions for several weeks longer than elsewhere in the country.

On Prisoner Health “Care”
Coronavirus exposes prisoners’ abysmal lack of any kind of true healthcare while incarcerated. Prisons are constitutionally required to provide for the welfare of inmates, but do the absolute minimum until promoted by lawsuits. Medical services in prisons and jails are often outsourced to private, for-profit companies, who know their captive patients have little recourse up to and including negligent homicide by doctors and nurses. And yes, there are dozens of court cases litigating this lethal indifference.

Because prisons and jails systematically underfund medical services, there is never adequate staff to

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We must keep that fire lit.
- Stephen Wilson
meet prisoners’ legitimate needs. (In this federal institution, a chart in the medical ward shows more than 50% of healthcare staff positions vacant — including clinical director.) Consequently, all healthcare is triaged—only life-threatening situations have even the hope of being addressed in a timely manner, and non-medical prisons guards can and often do overrule medical treatment they deem “unnecessary.” Prisoners suffer chronic ailments and precursors of major health problems—diabetes, heart failure, hypertension and dental decay — with no ability to receive treatment until conditions critically worsen.

In the case of coronavirus, early symptoms, such as high fever, persistent cough, and gastrointestinal distress routinely have a two-to three-week waiting period before prisoners are even seen by medical personnel. Thus, early in the epidemic, potentially contagious individuals simply went untreated.

Once the virus was publicly acknowledged, most prisons and jails began doing temperature checks—here they perform them weekly. But since those with coronavirus can go up to three days without showing symptoms, these checks will do nothing until it’s already too late. And what happens if a prisoner does have a fever? They’re thrown in solitary confinement and “quarantined,” often with minimal if any healthcare unless their symptoms turn deadly.

**On Respecting a Person’s Humanity**

Coronavirus highlights the prison-industrial complex’s dismissal of prisoners’ lives. For instance, in this facility, all prisoners are now required to wear masks. But despite recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, and this state’s department of public health, prisons guards and staff are not required to wear masks, and only about half do. The only vector for infection here — as there are currently no cases — are employees who travel to and form their communities daily. Yet even in a crisis, the prison makes a show of protecting itself from prisoners, rather than protecting prisoners from infection.

In all prisons and jails of which I’m aware, inmates are on some form of lockdown. Generally, this means no visits by family, friends, lawyers or volunteers, limited or no work at prisoners’ in-house jobs, and a 23-to 24-hour per day confinement to cells or housing units. This, indeed, may be prudent in a place where no social distancing is possible. Yet no effort is made by prison officials to maintain our humanity.

Limits on phone minutes were first increased, then calls were made free — but we have, at most, 15 minutes twice per week to place a call, along with every other prisoner desperately trying to stay in touch with family and relatives. Mail is, usually, going in and out, but stamps cost money — and many prisoners are not able to work to earn their usual 11 to 41 cents per hour. If there were an “economic relief package” for prisoners, as there is for folks on the outside who’ve lost their jobs, it would begin with free stamps to these physically and emotionally isolated human beings.

Most prisons have education and recreation departments. Here, those departments are simply shut down. No effort is being made, for instance, to distribute recreational or education materials to people trapped in their cells for upwards of 23 hours a day. Classes for GED and ESL are canceled, as are drug and alcohol addiction groups. This could be an opportunity for prisoners to study and learn — but “education” is missing in action. Recreation, which oversees exercise equipment, could be distributing tips on exercises to do in one’s cell, meditation to reduce stress and anxiety, stretching or yoga techniques — instead, staff just went home.

The chaplain, ostensibly still at work, makes no contact with prisoners unless they reach out to him. Prisoner ministries, overwhelmingly focused on authoritarian, penitential, individualistic modes of worship (for all faith traditions, but in particular, the do-
minionist, millenarian flavor of Christianity often led by chaplains themselves). They have very little to say in a crisis like this beyond, “read scripture.” Pastoral care, for an isolated and frightened people, is nonexistent.

On Making Clear the Source of Violence

Few experiences are more dehumanizing than being told, with contagion everywhere, that you are to be confined with hundreds of other people, under color of law, for your “health.” It also sharpens our perception as to who holds the real power and wields the true violence over our lives.

Prison officials often accept gangs and racial “cars” (groups) because, they say, it helps them maintain order. Your racial identity or affiliation is central to your experience of prison and to the very physical makeup of your environment: tables, chairs, TVs, phones and computers are often positioned by prisons so that they can be controlled by one group or another — with threats of violence for straying outside the lines. Guards and administrators thus encourage prisoners to take on some of the policing of each other’s behaviors that they themselves don’t want to do. (This “divide and conquer” strategy has for decades been prisons’ bulwark against social justice organizing on the inside.) Thus, on a day-to-day basis, it can feel as if most of the potential for violence is from prisoners rather than from guards.

An epidemic lockdown upends that experience. In celled facilities such as this (as opposed to dorm or “camp” facilities), your only real connection for weeks on end is to your cellmate. All power — when you’re permitted to shower, to eat, to receive medical attention, to place a phone call — is held by guards, administrators, and medical staff. This serves to remind those who are radically inclined that other prisoners — no matter how misguided or even brutal— are not the true enemy or the true oppressors. It is the prison-industrial complex that holds our freedom and our safety in escrow.

On Releasing Prisoners During a Pandemic

Some people — primarily the elderly, those with pre-existing medical conditions, prisoners near their release date, and some pretrial detainees are being considered for or have been released to halfway houses, home confinement or parole. This is, indeed, great! But it begs the question, if prisons are so dangerous in the midst of coronavirus, are they not dangerous in “normal” times? Every day in the United States, tens of thousands of people, accused but not convicted of a crime, are being detained solely because they cannot pay the cost of a cash bail. Some of those detainees are now being released. But why do we allow poverty to justify incarceration at any other time? Thousands of undocumented immigrants are being held in federal prisons, county jails, and make-shift internment camps with no actual prospect of doing “violence” if they are released. Does this presence of a contagion suddenly make these people so much more human than they would otherwise be? Similarly, many state and federal prisons hold inmates for decades, up to and including the terminal stages of illness. Yet now that elders and those with pre-existing conditions are at risk of contracting covid-19, we belatedly realize maybe it’s not such a good idea to execute them through incarceration.

Coronavirus is a health emergency, in and out of prisons. But how is it materially different than Hepatitis C or HIV — both epidemics in many prisons? By some estimates, 1 in 11 prisoners are sexually assaulted, and we know rates are even higher for women, trans folks, visibly/out LGBTQ+ prisoners, and “politically undesirable” inmates like sex offenders and alleged “snitches.” Yet, this has spurred no prison bureaucracy to declare a health emergency — toothless federal and state laws prohibiting sexual contact in prison are far cries from early-releasing those most at risk of being raped. In light of the necessary re-evaluation of incarceration in a time of epidemic, might this callous disregard for prisoners’ health
and safety be re-evaluated too?
In the midst of a pandemic, prisons do need to be emptied. But the warehousing of caged human beings is a practice that has never been just or human and that will still be true when the coronavirus finally recedes.
Will we learn the lessons of this public health crisis or will we leave prisoners to rot and die in “quarantine” when the next contagion hits? Will mass incarceration be recognized for the health emergency that it actually is?

What Abolition Means to Me
by Tauheed Sadat

To me the meaning of abolition is abstraction; it is the systematic taking away of oppression, while inevitably, and simultaneously gifting the comfort, independence, and right of freedom.

Abolition is the abolishment of a notion that freedom is a privilege reserved exclusively for the privileged.

Abolition is tantamount in importance to the emergence of a civil war, which led to the freedom of a people from a centuries-long burden of physical bondage.

Abolition is vindication of a historically blame-worthy nation, if said nation takes heed to abolition’s call.

I find, abolition may well be a beacon of light in the dark, predatory, and fettered society, which is ironically labeled the land of the free.

Abolition, to me is hope, it is love unapologetically bursting through as if it were a phoenix plunged into the depths of a caustic, and dauntingly hate-festered earth. To me abolition...

I don’t think you can work on your own. There’s definitely no way to dismantle the systems that we’re trying to dismantle on our own. That’s first and foremost.
- Mariame Kaba
Accountability does not happen in a vacuum. It requires a web of relationships to be able to exist. Yet it happens for the self to the self. If one of those two haves are not present, an internalized desire to be accountable and a container of community to hold it, then it cannot occur.

This lesson is currently very alive for me. As a child, I did not have an internalized desire for accountability, and so I caused great harm to others and myself. After I came to prison I got lucky. Melissa provided me with a container and in doing the work to reclaim my sanity I was practicing accountability without the language to properly describe what I was doing.

After Melissa died of breast cancer, I was no longer actually practicing accountability. I had the desire but lacked the container. I was coasting. I was stagnated. I was playing out the inertia of my previous personal work.

After I arrived at XXX I was able meet some people who also had that same internalized desire for accountability and we created and held the container of relationship necessary to practice accountability with each other.

Now, however, I am at XXX and once more I lack a container for practicing accountability in. I have tried for the last month to find people who can help me construct that container, but it’s not working. So once more I am forced to coast, play out the inertia of my previous work and lean upon my memories of everyone I have been in community with and practiced accountability with in the past. Which is not enough. It is not accountability. Accountability is a living breathing thing, while dwelling in the house of nostalgia is a dying by inches thing. Right now I am struggling with what it means to intentionally die by inches slowly enough that I will recognize it when it is time for me to be alive once more. As one of the people who I was in community with would often remind me, “Wherever you happen to be, this is the place of practice” and, “It’s like this right now.”

I don’t know how to cope with myself. So I can’t stop joking with the rest. With people who ain’t friends around people who don’t have real friends. But this feels like home. In a place I don’t belong. Been going so long they disconnect like I’m gone I’m use to the dial tone. LOL E.T. can’t phone home. Same song when they do pick up what you do? what you need? imma see what I can’t do! sorry I mean what I can do call back later somebody on the other line. Bye…

Practicing Accountability
by Amber

So Describable
by Shannon Dukes
The Imprisoned Black Radical Intellectual Tradition
by Russell Maroon Shoatz

We can date the imprisoned Black radical intellectual tradition from when Marcus Garvey, from a US federal prison in the early nineteen hundreds, spurred his followers on by writing... “look for me in the whirlwind.” A political prisoner, Garvey was already a world renowned intellectual and organizer, and remained one until his death as a free man.

Malcolm X and George Jackson, on the other hand, highlight another aspect of that tradition: the aimless and antisocial youth, who through self education and political consciousness, develop a burning need to struggle for justice. Though Garvey’s contribution to that tradition is not well known, Malcolm’s has been lionized in all arenas. George Jackson, nowadays, is only known amongst imprisoned and free world radical and intellectual circles.

Presently, the imprisoned Black radical intellectual tradition circles are a shadow of what they were a generation ago. Its spread has been contained by decades of isolating, through solitary confinement, those who adhere to it. It happens that technology handicapped the tradition because of its reliance on books, while narrowing the pool of potential adherents through the introduction of an almost endless selection of music, games and television programs.

Added to the imprisoned skeleton of the tradition that remains, small circles exist in the free world. The decades of isolation has been curtailed, allowing imprisoned Black radical intellectuals more room, while a number of them have gained their freedom from incarceration.

Technology has the potential to broaden and deepen the tradition. How? Wisely, utilized, technology has the potential to elevate many imprisoned individuals out of their present distraction into organically acquired postures of leverage over their futures. With the
aid of radicals in the free society, the imprisoned radical intellectuals can build enough support to gain access to the technology they can offer the imprisoned as the key to their freedom, financial security and self-esteem.

After all, the imprisoned possess two key elements of this endeavor: free time and a burning desire to go home.

1. Join hands between the imprisoned and the free world to struggle for real access to technology for the imprisoned.

2. Offer the imprisoned a real opportunity to learn technology thereby enabling them to leverage this knowledge into freedom, economic stability and self-esteem.

3. In the tradition of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and George Jackson, know that punishment of imprisonment can be neutralized by utilizing their time and mental capabilities, as earlier imprisoned Black radical intellectuals have done.

In Solidarity & Struggle,
US Political Prisoner Russell Maroon Shoatz

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**Cannibals**

by Ya’iyr

Because there are no consequences. b/c thrs nvr MEANINGFUL CONSEQUENCES! Cuz they know they ain’t gon be punished for that shit!

So, former officer derek chauvin got a sweet bail and will sit at home confused at why he’s been charged with a crime. He will have police protection to make sure there is no vigilante justice. Those police will pat him on his back and remind him that this will all blow over soon. He will be working as an armed security guard at a mall somewhere, before his next police job in a different state. He will still be confused as to why there is all this rioting and news coverage over him just having his dinner. Because he understands that we are their cattle. If they don’t kill us, they won’t have anything else to eat. Chauvin knows that Amerikkka owns Black people and the police are just the overseers on this huge plantation. He was just doing, what he’s been trained to do his whole life.

Try to imagine a Black slave in the 1800’s marching to the big house to complain to massa about one of the overseers whipping her. Can you imagine the slave owner punishing the overseer for abusing a slave? That picture is absurd.

It is absurd for Black people to expect justice from Amerikkka. Police struck peaceful marchers in front of the White House with batons, shields and rubber bullets because the bigot-in-chief wanted to cross the street and take a photo. There is no love for slaves — or those trying to help free them — at the big house.

Cops and racist whites are doing what they’ve been trained to do — beat us into submission and kill some of us to keep the others in line. Am I lying? Why don’t we see this happening to white people? When white men with guns walked onto the Kentucky governor’s property protesting stay-at-home orders,
the police didn’t disperse them with tear gas. They watched these armed men put a picture of the governor’s face on a doll and hang it from a tree. Donald called them patriots exercising their First and Second Amendment rights. I wonder, what those Second Amendment patriots would do, if they saw white person after white person brutally murdered by Black people? Now I’m lying, because I know what would happen. They don’t need reasons like that to kill us with their guns, or their knees, or chokeholds or nooses.

They protest with their guns as a threat: Give us what we demand, or we will take it. Our constitution gives us this right. Black people tried this before. They were defamed, locked up and assassinated. And history was rewritten about it. And so we see that the constitution was written to give the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to the white patriots who take what they want by violence. They are confident under the protection of the red white and blue. No cops in this country will shoot them for having a cell phone, or wallet, or a hairbrush, or hands or just because.

I watched a bodycam video of a cop pointing his gun at a white man running toward him and threatening him. The cop ran backward frantic: “I don’t want to kill you. Don’t make me shoot you!” He ran so far his open-doored car came into view. How far would he have run to avoid killing the white man begging to die? To the end of the earth. I know this, because the cop fell on the ground and still refused to shoot the crazed figure towering above him. He was willing to die to protect white life. He was doing what he’s been trained to do. Maybe he’s what they’re referring to, when they say there are many good cops.

I’m tired of hearing about these mysterious good cops. They never show up to drag bad cops off defenseless Black people and arrest them. They are a myth. I see a pack of wolves who view us as their prey. Why would they turn against each other in the middle of a hunt? They stand and watch when one of them slowly, sadistically cuts off our air. They fed on George Floyd. The state is nourished by our terror. Amerikkka is fat from devouring us. We are their cattle.

They raise us in pens called ghettos, slums and projects. They build barriers around those pens and say, “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Get an education, a job.” Then they hunt you down while you’re jogging, or carrying Skittles, or sleeping in your bed, or sitting on your couch eating ice cream, or playing video games...

They feed on us. They are doing what they’ve been trained to do. They know there are no meaningful consequences for destroying us. They will get away with it. Even if they are charged, they won’t be convicted. Even if they are convicted, they won’t go to prison. Even if they go to prison, they will be home in a few years. And so, there is no fear of reprisal in the racist vigilantes and dirty cops who terrorize us.

Former officer derek chauvin had eighteen complaints against him, yet he was never arrested or fired for his abuse of power. No prosecutor brought a “criminal complaint.” They refused to fire him until he finally murdered George Floyd on camera.

There are Black people in Amerikkka serving decades or life in prison for non-violent offenses. Blacks serving life in prison for killing in self-defense. Serving life for killing someone accidentally. Life for standing next to a killer. Sentenced to life because the real killer is a paid snitch. Sentenced to life because someone lied. If one lying cop puts you in handcuffs, and fills out a criminal complaint, you’re going to jail. You will be overcharged and prosecuted until you are convicted or plead guilty, no matter the facts of the case.

These cops lie on the witness stand. They plant evidence. They intimidate witnesses. They coerce confessions. They arrest Black reporters on camera and lie saying, “they didn’t comply.” They steal our lives from us. It’s what they’ve been trained to do. It’s their job. It’s how they eat. They feed on us. We are their cattle.
They store our bodies in warehouses awaiting slaughter. They will not free us. They will continue to eat us.

Our lives only matter to Amerikkka as a consumable resource. Listen to their responses to the destruction of our bodies: "We will get fair justice. We will carefully investigate and follow the law." Where is the fiery rhetoric? "We will make them pay! We won't let them hurt anyone else! We will bring the full weight of our power against these animals!"

That language is reserved for us, when they launch new imaginative campaigns to cage us. They declared war on drugs... on us. They call us super-predators to justify their violence. Where is the war on corrupt prosecutors, dirty cops and biased judges? When they put us away for decades and a lucky soul proves his innocence, he is barely afforded an apology. Where is the jail time for the ones who stole his life?

There is no fear of consequences for stealing Black life. They are doing what they've been trained to do when they shoot us, choke us, put us in cages or call the cops on us for no reason. White people are taught, and conditioned, to believe that they have the right to take away our lives for money, political reasons or just because we ask them to leash their dogs.

And so derek chauvin and the other cops on the scene were just doing their jobs, when they devoured George Floyd. I'm saying his name aloud as I write this. It hurts. I have to say it. I hate saying it. I have to say Breonna Taylor, Arnaud Arbery, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Sean Bell, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Mike Brown, Atatiana Jefferson, Stephon Clark, Aiyana Jones, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray... It hurts me to say, what I have to say.

Each name — each stolen life — cuts away a piece of my heart. When I look at a smug pig I feel heartless. Furious. RAGE. I fantasize about my knee on his neck. I picture myself brutalizing them. And I know that this is their goal: to take away my humanity. To make me a monster — like them. I won’t hide that rage. I will not preach peace.

After cutting chunks out of my heart, my rage may be all that they’ve left me. Without it, I fear I’ll be empty. And when all I have left is my Black body, I’ll use it to save other Black bodies. Not because I want vengeance. There is little satisfaction in that.

But maybe my strong Black body, devoid of love and compassion, can commit one act that will finally make it a fearful thing to attack Black people in Amerikkka. I know that this fantasy is illogical. That I can’t take the bait to react irrationally — to hasten my own death. Even if violence is the only language this country understands.

They wrote violence into their constitution; that the people have the right to take their freedom, justice and equality by force, if necessary. The right to use tools of violence is explicit in the Second Amendment. Violence is the way they hold criminals accountable. But it’s not a crime for white people to murder Black people.

In 1921 over three hundred Black people were murdered by whites in one night in Oklahoma. Not one person was charged with a crime. So what is our recourse? When will someone be held accountable? When will white people be afraid of the consequences for attacking Black people?

We kneel in peaceful protest. They blackball us and kneel on our necks. They don’t respect peaceful protest. No revolution is ever peaceful. They will stop killing us, when they fear consequences. When we stop allowing them to treat us like cattle. Everyone in this country knows what’s happening. No one can claim ignorance or innocence. Either you are fighting against injustice or you are complicit.

If you watch a murder, and do nothing, that is conspiracy. If you watch a rape, and don’t try to stop it, you are an accomplice. That’s how the criminal justice system works for Black people. I sit in prison today,
because of the actions of a man who was next to me. I was arrested instantly without careful investigations. I was sentenced to a minimum of twenty nine years in prison, presumably, because I didn't stop him. It doesn't matter, that I didn't know he was armed. It doesn't matter, that he was defending me. Amerikkka said I must be caged for not acting.

But under any moral standard, you who watch what is done to us, and do not act, are accessories to the violence committed against us. Amerikkka will not punish you for watching us being lynched. That judgment is between you and your god. But to you, who just watch: You are those cops who stood by while George Floyd was murdered. You are cowards. You are doing what you’ve been trained to do. Your stomach is full from consuming the suffering of my people.

Some of you will say it’s sad. Some of you will shed tears. That pain you feel — it’s just gas. You may offer comments, thoughts and prayers. Then you will change the channel. You are fake. You don’t care. Keep your thoughts to yourself — and your prayers. Your god allows you to abide injustice.

But there are some of you, who will prove that real love is action. You will join us and move to make change. And I will feel that. And I will know, that I’m not empty. That there is hope.

Until the next time I can’t breathe.

Safety, safeguarded by violence, is not really safety.

- Angela Davis

8toAbolition to In The Belly Readers

Dear friends,

We developed 8 to Abolition in the hopes of providing viable steps towards the end of policing, imprisonment, and prosecution. It came as a response to the reformist platform of “8 Can’t Wait,” which said that we could reduce police violence by 72%, if we did things like banning chokeholds and asking for more transparency.

But abolition requires us to move beyond the realm of possibilities given to us by an imperialist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal, and anti-Black state. We feel that abolition (as a framework, and of the Prison Industrial Complex) reminds us that death by police and death by incarceration are never acceptable. There are many more steps than the ones we cover — we understand that the very foundations of society must be completely transformed to value collective care, healing, survivorship, mutual aid, and Black liberation.

We do this work on the shoulders of incredible Black abolitionist feminists, like Angela Davis and Mariame Kaba. We also owe a lot to the abolitionist imaginations of people imprisoned for, and while, dreaming of this transformation. The world we envision together is not one without violence, but one where we have created the conditions for a world without prisons, prosecutors, or police — as Mariame Kaba says. It was critical to us that, as people shout “Defund the Police,” they recognize that police violence is deeply connected to the harm produced by incarceration. It’s not enough to defund and abolish police; we must abolish prisons, ICE, and detention shelters, while driving funds towards public health, school, education, and transit.

We’re grateful that you will take the time to read 8 to Abolition.
#8TOABOLITION

1. Defund the Police
   - Reject any proposed expansion to police budgets.
   - Demand the highest budget cuts per year, until they slash police budget to zero.
   - Require police, not cities, to be liable for misconduct and violence settlements.
   - Ban police contracting for nonprofits and institutions.
   - Reduce the power of police unions.
   - Abolish asset forfeiture programs and laws.
   - Deplatform white supremacist public officials.
   - Prohibit private-public innovation schemes that profit from temporary technological fixes to systemic problems of police abuse and violence. These contracts and data-sharing arrangements, however profitable for technologists and reformists, are lethal.

2. Demilitarize Communities
   - Disarm law enforcement officers, including the police and private security.
   - Remove cops from hospitals
   - End the militarization of Black and brown neighborhoods by ending broken windows policing, “precision policing,” community policing, and all iterations of quality of life policing programs (neighborhood policing, “gang” policing, “repeat-offender” policing, etc).
   - Surveillance technologies (CCTV, face printing, DNA and biometric databases, acoustic gunshot detection, drones, AI and risk profiling algorithms, and other forms of predictive policing) are weapons in the hands of law enforcement. End police, military, and immigration enforcement contracts with any private companies that provide these services, and prohibit the experimental design and rollout of in-house systems.
   - Dismantle fusion centers, county crime analysis centers, real time crime centers, gun and gang violence intelligence centers, and purge the attendant databases.
   - Withdraw participation in police militarization programs and refuse federal grants that entangle municipal police entities with the Department of Homeland Security, the Joint Terrorism Task Force, and FBI.
   - Prohibit training exchanges between U.S. law enforcement and global military and policing entities. These relationships circulate deadly techniques and technologies, exporting the American model of racist policing worldwide.
   - Repeal all laws that hide, excuse, or enable police misconduct.

3. Remove Police From Schools
   - Remove police, both public and private, from all schools.
   - Call on universities to dissolve relationships with police departments.
   - Prohibit police departments from using city contracts with universities to do IRB-exempt data analysis, geographic and community profiling, human-computer amelioration studies, and predictive analytics. Instead, divert funds to public service-related studies and community collaborations.
   - Remove surveillance tech and metal detectors from all schools.
   - End school zero-tolerance disciplinary policies.
   - End the use of carceral-lite punishment of students, including suspensions and expulsions, that disproportionately target Black and brown students, especially Black girls.
   - Urge states to repeal truancy laws.
   - Prohibit the surveillance of Black and brown students by their teachers, counselors, and school officials through programs that criminalize students and exploit relationships of trust with school officials, including Countering Violent Extremism/Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention.

4. Free People from Prisons and Jails
   - Permanently close local jails.
   - Pressure state legislatures to end mandatory arrest and failure to protect laws that lead to the criminalization of survivors of gendered violence.
   - Reject “alternatives to incarceration” that are carceral in nature, including problem-solving courts and electronic monitoring and coercive restorative justice programs.
   - Free all people from involuntary confinement, including but not limited to jails, prisons, immigrant detention centers, psychiatric wards, and nursing homes, starting with vulnerable populations such as those who are aging, disabled, immunocompromised, held on bail, held for parole violations, and survivors.
• Cut funding to prosecutor offices.
• End pre-trial detention.
• End civil commitment.
• Release all people held pre-trial and on parole violations.
• Make all communication to and from prisoners free.
• Release all people held in post-conviction detention, end family separation, and let our undocumented community members come home.

5. Repeal Laws that Criminalize Survival
• Repeal local ordinances that criminalize people involved in the sex trades, drug trades, and street economies.
• Call on Mayors to grant clemencies to criminalized survivors of violence.
• Repeal local ordinances that criminalize the occupation of public spaces—particularly for people experiencing homelessness—under statutes against loitering, loitering for the purposes of sex work, fare beating, panhandling, soliciting, camping, sleeping, and public urination and defecation.
• Repeal statutes that criminalize survivors of gendered violence, including mandatory arrest and failure to protect laws.
• On the road to complete decriminalization, immediately decriminalize all misdemeanor offenses, which currently account for 80% of total court dockets.
• End all fines and fees associated with the criminal legal process, including ticketing, cash bail, court costs, and parole and probation fees.

6. Invest in Community Self-Governance
• Promote neighborhood councils as representative bodies within municipal decision making.
• Invest in multilingual resources for immigrant and asylum-seeking communities.
• Assess community needs and invest in community-based resources, including groups from tenant unions to local shop-owners and street vendors, prioritizing those from marginalized groups.
• Invest in community-based public safety approaches, including non-carceral violence prevention and intervention programs and skills-based education on bystander intervention, consent and boundaries, and healthy relationships.

7. Provide Safe, Accessible Housing for Everyone
• Cancel rent without burden of repayment during COVID-19.
• Repurpose empty buildings, houses, apartments, and hotels to house people experiencing homelessness.
• Prohibit evictions.
• Provide unequivocal support and resources to refugee and asylum seeking communities.
• Allow Community Benefits Agreements to be a community governed means of urban planning.
• Make public housing accessible to everyone, repealing discriminatory laws barring people from accessing resources based on income, race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, or history of incarceration.
• Support and promote the existence of community land trusts for Black and historically displaced communities.
• Remove cops from all re-entry and shelter institutions.
• Ensure that survivors of gendered violence have access to alternative housing options in the event that their primary housing becomes unsafe.
• Provide non-coercive housing options for young people experiencing abuse or family rejection of their queer or trans identities.

8. Fully Invest in Care, No Cops
• Allocate city funding towards healthcare infrastructure (including non-coercive mental healthcare), wellness resources, neighborhood based trauma centers, non-coercive drug and alcohol treatment programming, peer support networks, and training for healthcare professionals.
• Make these services available for free to low-income residents. Adopt a care not cops model.
• Invest in teachers and counselors, universal childcare, and support for all family structures.
• Free and accessible public transit.
• End the use of property taxes to determine school funding.
• Install safe and sanitary gender-inclusive public restrooms.
• Ensure investment in community-based food banks, grocery cooperatives, gardens, and farms.
• Ensure free, and more extensive, public transport, especially servicing marginalized and low-income communities.
• Invest in youth programs that promote learning, safety, and community care.
A WORLD WITHOUT PRISONS OR POLICE, WHERE WE CAN ALL BE SAFE

DEFUND THE POLICE

DEMILITARIZE COMMUNITIES

WE BELIEVE IN A WORLD WHERE THERE ARE ZERO POLICE MURDERS BECAUSE THERE ARE ZERO POLICE.

REPEAL LAWS CRIMINALIZING SURVIVAL

INVEST IN COMMUNITY SELF-GOVERNANCE

FREE PEOPLE FROM PRISONS & JAILS

REMOVE POLICE FROM SCHOOLS

PROVIDE SAFE HOUSING FOR EVERYONE

INVEST IN CARE, NOT COPS
Abolition in Six Words

Last month, Stevie challenged abolitionists to encapsulate penal abolition in just six words. Here are some responses:

**Tearing down policing & strengthening communities.**

A world without prisons, police, courts.

**NOBODY LEFT BEHIND. EVERYBODY CARED FOR.**

Abolition is about presence, not absence.
(paraphrasing Ruth Wilson Gilmore)

Healing together, patiently and without vengeance.

SMASH IT DOWN AND BUILD ANEW

Community needs, not oppression by division.

**COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY**

**BOUNDLESS HUMANITY**

**INTERTWINED STRUGGLES**

FIGHTING STATE VIOLENCE THAT MAINTAINS CAPITALISM

Replacing punishment with justice and care.

Cause and effect of classless society

We would love to read your answer to this six-word challenge.

Send us your response.
Yes, I know you
by Julius Kimya Humphrey, Sr.

Not once have my eyes gazed into yours.
Or my ears heard the sound of your voice...
yet, like Christ, I know you.

I have rejoiced from your friendship to humanity
fought back anger because of the injustice that kidnapped you.

The race prejudice that hides behind the very shield of authority...
in the shadow of slavery. The thoughts of the framers who penned the Constitution, I now look upon their stone-chiseled faces in anger.

The Black bird that’s denied the right to fly...
unchained only by death...
pushed into freedom where its meaning become known for the first time - I tell you, yes! I know you.

Your wings flap loud against the open sky
like Ouverure’s and Turner’s Resonating the spirit of revolutionists who continue to look up to you. From the young heartbeat to the faint rhythm of the old...
the first breath to the last...
you will always exist.

Like Garvey and Malcolm...
Huey, George, and Pinell, along with Wopashitwe Mondo Eye We Langa; and the life lost each day that now scream...
BLACK LIVES MATTER. yes! I know you... and always will.
Fear
by Antoine (Indy) Walker

FEAR: The word that surfaced in my mind as I cleaned my cell today... FEAR. It gave me pause.

Why did this word force its way from my subconscious mind into my conscious mind? Presenting itself in a way that wouldn't allow me to ignore it. FEAR.

As I sat on the edge of my bunk to contemplate the symbolism of this word, I had a revelation: Fear. This is the answer to many of the questions I’ve asked myself numerous times during my 10 year’s of incarceration: Why is the mental state of so many prisoners so passive, docile, when it comes to resisting the guards? How have so many prisoners been beaten into mental submission? FEAR.

Fear has been subliminally present all along. Few have chosen to speak out loudly and boldly about what is between the lines. FEAR.

Fear is the reason many prisoners will physically harm each other for verbal disrespects. Yet, when guards utter the same disrespect, the same prisoners fold. Is this learned or inherited submission?

It could be both, but what really matters is it needs to be unlearned. Disinherited, if you wish. I was born with an abolitionist heart, so resistance has been pumping in my blood since day one. As a kid, I had to challenge everything.

I’m speaking to those of us who are abolitionists. Those who want to fight, resist, but remain frozen with fear, let you beautiful, strong voice be heard.

Only death can silence the living. If you have breath in your body, you don’t have to be silent. Stand up for what you believe in.

Learn the corrupt rules that govern our confined. The rules that govern our broken society. To crack a code, you must first learn the language it is written in. This is why, I stress educating yourself on the language of the current system.

René Descartes said: “The greatest minds are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues.” We, abolitionists, are great minds.

We don’t seek glory or fame. We seek change, so it’s inevitable that people will know our names. We are at war with the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). We must be able to trust every soldier that stands next to us on the battlefield.

Loyalty is a must and you mustn’t betray that trust. For it is key to the longevity of the movement. To betray each other is to betray the movement. This is why we need to quickly identify those who are detrimental to our movement and rid our ranks of them.

You must be not only willing to fight and resist, but to learn and be taught, so that you can start to educate others. As a leader, I realize soldiers are only as strong as their leaders. There are no bad teams. Only bad leaders. I must practice what I preach. Not just teach, what I preach.

I have the responsibility to be the best I can be for you, for our movement, for me. If you are willing to be taught, and you’re loyal, you will be the best abolitionists you can be. Just follow my lead.

Your voice is your weapon. I don’t encourage you to fight
the guards, because I see first-hand that this corrupt system will only bury you deeper in the PIC for that type of resistance. But when you speak about what’s wrong and the injustices you suffer, you are taking a swing at one of the PIC’s most relied on defense systems: \textit{Silence}.

Your voice is the key. That can open the door through which exposure comes. Your voice has many forms - writings, demonstrations, strikes, petitions, poetry, art, and more. All these are tools. Weapons with which you can wage war against the PIC. The US's Constitution's First Amendment entitles us as human beings the right to freedom of speech, but this is for all people, not just US citizens.

Everyone on earth has this right. Why not utilize it to the fullest. Buddha said: "The tongue, like a sharp knife, kills without drawing blood."

I leave you with my thoughts on \textbf{FEAR}: It is a useless emotion. It only serves to hold you back.

We’ve all known fear at one time or another. Yet only few of us have chosen to challenge what we fear. But it’s worth challenging because you soon enough see that most of what you feared wasn’t scary at all. It was simply new. Unknown.

People fear what they don’t understand. What they don’t know. So my advice to my abolitionists, to my LGBTQ community: \textbf{Knowledge}. Knowledge is important in overcoming fear. Know what you fear! Learn it! Fight it!

\textbf{Have no FEAR!}
For Malcolm U.S.A.
by Jaquan Richardson

thin, black javelin
Flying low.
Heads up!
Hear Malcolm go!

Cheekless tiger
on the prowl.
Breathlessly:
Hear Malcolm growl.

lightning, lightning.
shot the sky.
Silently:
Did Malcolm die?

Brother, brother,
Hold my hand.
Malcolm was
my native land.
Are Prisons Obsolete?
Discussion Questions
by Stephen Wilson

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis writes:

“Few people find life without the death penalty difficult to imagine. On the other hand, the prison is considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives.” (p. 9)

She continues:

“This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families. The prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.” (p. 10)

- Why is it easier to imagine a social order without the death penalty, the ultimate act of vengeance, than a social order without LWOP?
- Why is it easier to imagine a social order without the death penalty, than a social order without prison?
- How has the prison become a natural part of our society?
- What caused this naturalization?
- Without prisons, what would we use to remedy and prevent harm?
- What would justice look like without prisons?
- How did our nation go from around 200,000 people incarcerated in 1970 to over 2,000,000 people in 2017 without there ever being a national debate on the effectiveness of prisons?
- How was mass incarceration pulled off without any major opposition or backlash?
- Why do we call the carceral system the prison-industrial complex?
- What role do prisons play in the national, state and local economy?

Angela Davis says: “On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, there is reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them.” (p.15)

**Do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer.**

She continues: “Criminals and evildoers are, in the collective imagination, fantasized as people of color.”

**How was this accomplished? What was used to create this picture?**

Angela Davis says: “The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers.” (p.16)

**What are some real issues that have negatively impacted communities from which most prisoners are drawn? How do prisons cover or distort those issues?**

She continues: “Mass imprisonment generates profits as it devours social wealth, and thus it tends to reproduce the very conditions that lead people to prison.” (p.17)

**What does she mean by “social wealth” and how do prisons reproduce the very conditions that lead one to prison?**
Dates in Radical History:  
July

July 01  
1829  
Uprising of enslaved people on the ship La Amistad. The ship is taken over and eventually reaches Long Island, NY.

July 01  
2011  
Tens of California prisoners in the SHU and 6000+ prisoners elsewhere participate in a work and hunger strike for four weeks.

July 05  
1852  
Frederick Douglass delivers his “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” speech in Rochester, NY.

July 08  
2013  
Hunger strike at Pelican Bay to protest long-term solitary. At its peak, it includes 30,000 prisoners refusing meals.

July 10  
1973  
The Bahamas gains independence from the UK after more than two centuries of colonial occupation. The nation is still subject to neo-colonialism and imperialism to this day despite nominal independence.

July 14  
1789  
Parisians storm the Bastille in Paris, an army fortress, political prison and bastion of the monarchy. This is a turning point in the French Revolution.

July 16  
1862  
Abolitionist and feminist Ida B. Wells is born into slavery in Holly Springs, Mississippi. She will later be a leader and organizer in the Civil Rights movement.

July 24  
1783  
Simon Bolivar, known as The Liberator, is born in Caracas, Venezuela. He will later be instrumental in gaining Latin American Independence from Spanish colonial forces in the early 19th century.

July 26  
1953  
Fidel Castro and comrades stage an attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, after which Castro will be incarcerated for two years.

July 27  
1919  
A Chicago race riot erupts after the death of Eugene Williams, who drowned in Lake Michigan. It leads to the deaths of 23 Black people and 15 white people, the injury of 537 people and houselessness for 1000 people.

The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.  
- Ida B. Wells
## Dates in Radical History: Black August

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 02 1851</td>
<td>The Underground Railroad, a clandestine network of white and Black abolitionists and enslaved Black peoples throughout the country begins expanding and coordinating a protracted war of liberation against the white American slaveocracy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 02 1975</td>
<td>Novelist, essayist, and playwright James Baldwin is born in NYC.</td>
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<td>August 03 2010</td>
<td>Anti-racist feminist militant, revolutionary abolitionist, and imprisoned radical intellectual Marilyn Buck dies of cancer. She is an influential figure in the history of numerous abolitionist organizations including Critical Resistance and the Anarchist Black Cross Federation.</td>
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<td>August 06 1999</td>
<td>Laura Whitehorn is free after 14 years in prison. Whitehorn was a member of the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee and still fights for PIC abolition.</td>
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<td>August 07 1970</td>
<td>Jonathan Jackson, William Christmas and James McClain are killed trying to liberate George Jackson in California.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 08 1971</td>
<td>The provisional Government of The Republic of New Afrika defends itself in an armed standoff with the FBI and Mississippi police.</td>
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<td>August 10 1970</td>
<td>Prisoners in NYC Jails, led by Black Panthers and the Young Lords, rise up in protest of horrific conditions, abuse and overcrowding.</td>
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<td>August 11-16, 1965</td>
<td>In response to the public police beating of two Black men and their shoving of a Black woman into a growing crowd, a 5 day revolt against white supremacy and property ensues in the South Central Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts.</td>
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<td>August 12 2015</td>
<td>Nicaraguan radical Hugo Pinell, a member of the San Quentin 6, is killed by white supremacists while incarcerated in California. Vigils and memorials are held across the country in the months to follow.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 21 1831</td>
<td>Nat Turner, an enslaved abolitionist, leads a slave revolt in Virginia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 21 1971</td>
<td>Black Power revolutionary George Jackson is assassinated in San Quentin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 22 1791</td>
<td>The Haitian revolution begins! Enslaved Black people rise up against the French colonizers and overthrow their colonial rule.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 24 2003</td>
<td>Safiya Bukhari, Black Panther, political prisoner, radical intellectual, dies in Queens.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 28 1963</td>
<td>250,000 people marched for civil rights to the Lincoln Memorial in what is known as The March on Washington.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 30 1800</td>
<td>Gabriel Prosser’s rebellion begins.</td>
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Brick by Brick, Word by Word

In her essay, “On Leaving Prison”, Monica Crosby writes:

I have met hundreds of people from many different organizations purporting to be allies of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in the sixteen months I have been out of prison. However, the people I can call on for support are few in comparison to the number of people and organizations I’ve come across. I have come to believe there is a difference between ‘ally’ and ‘community’. The idea of ‘ally-ship’ to me suggests a temporary connection—once a shared goal is accomplished, all the people involved go their separate ways. It is practical, yes, and necessary to have allies in any movement, but to me, an ally-ship feels dry and dispassionate.

and,

To me, community means something different. Within community, there is shared responsibility and accountability, caring and connection. It is understood that the health, happiness, success, security, and stability of the community is directly connected to that of the individuals within it. In community, support is given where it’s needed. Solidarity is lived, not just a word. Monica differentiates between being in ally-ship and being in community. She sees community as the basis for solidarity. We would like to know what you think about this passage.

Also,

How do you define community and solidarity?

What are some differences between being in solidarity and being in coalition or alliance with someone?

Let us know your opinion. We’d love to hear it.

Shannon Dukes answers Brick by Brick from Vol. 1:

What does “crime” mean to you?

Money, mayhem, manipulation, and a means of survival. A sick way to show the world that I’m not a lazy fuck up in my own eyes.

What does “safety” mean to you?

A word you utter to the weak and confused to let the weak know who’s really in charge.
A view from
The iron curtain
At a world
In flux -
Superstitions,
Notions,
Facades
Crumble
to Dust.
The Iron Curtain.
They ask me
if I’m experiencing
a Crisis.
I say
that the world
is in crisis -
unmasking
daily crises -
plural.
Prisons,
rent unpaid
and evictions
still made,
of scarcity
in a world of
plenty,
slave trade by
a heartless,
robotic
state.

Cold,
Calculating,
branding you with
cold calculations.
The Iron Curtain.
Shelter in place!
The Prison within
the Prison house of Nations
is on Lockdown,
in a 6’ X 12’
Concrete box
some may soon
call a tomb.
We,
the Expendables,
The Wretched of
a Dying Earth.
It’s official,
Trump signed it.
But we have a
High PATTERN score
so therefore
Nobody CARES,
and that’s a pattern.
A view from
The Iron Curtain -
The sun
rises above
the barbed wire.
Together
we can too.
Interview with Abolitionist, Comrade, and IWOC Spokesperson Kevin Steele

Interviewed by IJ

In The Belly had the honor of interviewing Kevin Steele, an abolitionist and organizer with the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee of New York City and the Campaign to Bring Mumia Home. Kevin and IWOC invite incarcerated comrades to write to them to get involved with their work. The New York chapter’s mailing address is:

IWOC-NYC
PO Box 721
1132 Southern Blvd
Bronx, NY 10459

I: Thank you for speaking with us. Would you mind introducing yourself and your work as an abolitionist?

K: Peace. I’m an abolitionist, as well as an organizer. I’m with the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, the New York chapter. I’m also with the Campaign to Bring Mumia Home, and I’m affiliated with some other organizations doing the same work that I’m doing.

I: What were some of the experiences that helped to politicize and radicalize you, and bring you into this work?

K: At the core, it was me going to prison. Before prison I was just like the average male teen in the Bronx. I gang-banged. I had no type of political education before I went to prison. And it wasn’t until, on Rikers Island, I ran into a few guys, they was part of the Nation of Gods and Earths, that’s a branch off the Nation of Islam. And these guys, they was the slickest talking people I ever met. And they had a lot of knowledge.
I used to sit and listen to them speak about Black history, and ancient history, and that always intrigued me. And there was one conversation where they spoke about George Jackson, and gave me the book Blood In My Eye. That's when it all started. This was in 2012, and that book changed my life. I thought that book was amazing. It struck me even more, because the comrade George Jackson wasn't really politicized until he went to prison as well. And for him to write this book, from prison—it blew my mind. That's when I started to do as much research as possible on how to make a positive change in this world.

I: I was just talking with Stephen Wilson about George Jackson, about reading Soledad Brother and seeing how long it took, and how many different kinds of starts, and failures, and confused analyses he went through to get to where he could write Blood In My Eye. But he did it. So how did you get involved with IWOC specifically?

K: So I actually stumbled across IWOC. It wasn’t intentional that I joined, none of this happened intentionally actually. It was all just something that was really set in stone for me to be a part of this movement. When I was upstate at a maximum facility, by that time I was organizing inside. I was doing hunger strikes—which is not really a good idea, in my opinion. But I was doing different ways of striking, trying to organize and politicize people as much as possible while I was incarcerated. Somebody, one of the comrades in there, he knew I was doing this at the time. And IWOC actually reached out to him. I guess at the time IWOC was sending letters to people. The comrade wasn’t into what they were doing, so one day in the yard he brought me their letter, and said “listen, I think they sent this to the wrong person, I think they meant to send this to you. So you should reach out to them and see what they’re about.” And I had never heard of IWOC at the time, but I was willing to work with anyone that was for the cause that I was on.

It was amazing how it happened. I reached out to them and told them where I was at. A lot of people on the outside are afraid to work with inside organizers, because of the backlash that can happen out here. And because of the stigma of people behind the wall. So any organization I reached out to, I always let them know what was my political views. If they was with it, they was with it. If not, well, OK. It just happened that IWOC was all the way with what I was thinking.

I: How do you see the relationship between prison abolition and anti-capitalist struggle?

K: It goes hand in hand, right? You can’t be against capitalism and not for prison abolition. It has to go hand in hand. All of this is still a form of slavery, capitalism is a form of slavery. Capitalism gave birth to slavery, which is something I learned from Fred Hampton. And if you’re against slavery, you have to be against prison. Prison slavery, right? The 13th Amendment lets us know that slavery in Amerika still exists, they just transformed it into prison slavery instead of chattel slavery and farming fields of cotton. They go hand in hand. Every abolitionist I have ever run into was against capitalism. There is no separating them, in my eyes.

I: I also wanted to ask, you already mentioned George Jackson, but is there anyone else who you take special inspiration from? Who are some others from the history of the movement, living or dead, who are particularly important to you?

K: I definitely have a lot of people who have influenced me. And I still read them, and now that I am home I get to watch a lot of them speak. My biggest inspiration, as a whole, is the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. But individually, I always look toward Fred Hampton, and George Jackson, and Stokely Carmichael/Kwame Ture.
Then I have other big inspirations, like Steve Biko from South Africa. I still love Angela Davis to this day. I did a piece at NYU, I spoke at NYU and she was there. That was like—it’s like a kid growing up playing basketball, and finally gets to meet Lebron James. That’s how it felt for me. I love the Black Panther Party, it changed my life. And now that I get to interact with former members, and the New Afrikan Black Panther Party. It’s amazing. I speak to Mumia [Abu-Jamal] on the phone, and I tell him he’s like Michael Jordan in my eyes. I’m still me, I’m just doing a lot of political work, so I would probably ask Mumia for his autograph if I ever get to meet him. Which is weird, but that’s how I look at these guys. They’re my biggest inspiration.

I: It must be amazing to be part of this history and be able to talk to Mumia.

K: I’ll say, I can’t speak on all of them because that would take up too much time. But Fred Hampton being my biggest inspiration, there’s a reason. For one, he was so young. That blew my mind when I first learned about him. And how his transition was—that’s what made me attracted to him. He was always politicized, since he was a kid, but it’s how he made the transition from the NAACP to the Black Panthers. That is a big jump in my eyes, to go from the youth leader of the NAACP to the Chairman of the Black Panther Party, that’s a whole different idea. His mindset was, he was trying to organize street organizations. And that is so much power right there. That’s something I’m trying to do out here as well, because I got it from him. Because I realized how much power there is with these guys, and if you can politicize them, you can actually get more help than if you go to the college campuses, which he did as well. But the Young Lords [the revolutionary Puerto Rican organization] he politicized. And there was the Young Patriots, the white organization, they all later formed the Rainbow Coalition. That blew my mind when I read that.

And now, I hear him speak and like, damn, this guy’s like 19, 20 years old. That was amazing. He’s my main inspiration.

I: How do you see and how do you help people see the difference between reform and abolition? It sounds like you’re really drawing on this history of Fred Hampton pivoting from a reformist organization to a revolutionary organization.

K: That’s true. It’s funny, because I deal with a lot of reformist people. I don’t have nothing—well I do have something against them, but we don’t have beef. (Laughter) When I’m speaking in these circles, when I’m speaking to people that’s not equipped with knowing what’s going on, that don’t actually know the difference between abolition and reform. When people hear the word abolition, they thinking mayhem, there’s chaos, they’re thinking all kinds of TV show stuff—like Sons of Anarchy and Game of Thrones. They’re thinking stuff like that. That’s not what we mean. What’s helping me so far, when I explain the difference between the two, I always use Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Malcolm being the abolitionist and Martin being the reformer. They both have the same end goal—which is freedom, for all—the end goal is to overthrow oppression and gain freedom for people. But how to go about doing it, was two different paths. This is why, before they both was killed, they met, and they sat down and had their conversation. And that’s my best way of treating it—I’m a Malcolm to somebody’s Martin. We’re not beefing, but we just have different ways of doing it. I don’t think that reformers want prison, but they just can’t see that far down the line, to not be in prison. And that’s my problem. They thinking now, and we thinking now as well, but we also thinking ten steps ahead. For some reason, they don’t want to think that far. They’re like no, they have prisons, we need to make them comfortable. And I’m saying “OK, cool, but we have to shut them down,” and for some reason they can’t get that.
That’s my take—it’s that Martin and Malcolm thing. Both the same end goals, different ways to go about doing it.

I: You hear this a lot, where reformers will say abolitionists don’t care about conditions. This comes up a lot in New York, when reformers are talking about building new jails instead of just closing Rikers with no new jails.

K: Yea, that’s bullshit. I have been thinking about this for a long time. My whole thing was I have actually done time on Rikers Island. And that’s what a lot of reformers are not doing. That’s the truth, a lot of reformers aren’t doing jail time. I have met maybe two that was in prison, and I know a lot of abolitionists that came from prison. Even that alone, I would rather be with someone who has been through the experience, than someone who is punching numbers behind some keyboard, doing statistics, that’s nonsense. And I know how bad Rikers is—not CO’s individually, but the system as a whole. I have seen CO’s come in, rookies thinking they’re going to be the perfect CO, and they end up doing exactly what the rest of them are doing. And that was always my beef. Their theory that it’s certain COs, certain houses. It is the system, and there is no fixing the system. You have to get rid of the system, it’s that simple. And Rikers is the oldest system. I’m talking about for county prisons—it’s the oldest one that has to be broken down. And they’re saying “all right, let’s close Rikers, and open up little jails.” That doesn’t make any sense to me. This is like saying “let’s close down this plantation, the biggest plantation, and let’s move all these slaves to these little plantations around Georgia.” It’s still a plantation, it’s not going to be better because it’s small. Still slaving, still going to be mistreatment. And I have been to Rikers Island, I have been to multiple buildings on Rikers Island, each building is the same. They will be no different, it will be the exact same. You don’t break a big plantation down to make a little one. And this is happening all over. But the reason we had this campaign in 2018, was because of one little plantation. It was a small little state prison, Lee Correctional Facility. And that little prison erupted the whole nation. So I always go to that, when they say “the smaller the facility, the safer.” Lee Correctional started it all.

I: Would you say more about Lee? Because we’re going to talk about Black August, so maybe you could tell us about what happened at Lee and the response to it.

K: Yea, in 2018 there was a riot at Lee Correctional. That’s in South Carolina. The prison guards allowed this to happen. They allowed enslaved people to kill each other and to allow this riot to go on, they didn’t stop it or anything. There were multiple deaths. [7 people were killed]. It was at this moment that Jailhouse Lawyers said, “Something has to change.” And then they sent out a bunch of mail to a bunch of organizations about how they’re gonna basically strike. They’re gonna boycott and try to make some changes. And they came up with a whole list of demands. I can’t remember the demands off the top of my head, but this is why I go with reform and abolition are not that far apart. It’s just that the reformist doesn’t think that far ahead, because all these demands are what a reformist would think are reformist demands. The demands weren’t “free all prisoners, let everybody go,” like people would think. But they were written up demands by people, who are incarcerated, that made perfect sense. They seemed like a given, you know? They called for a nationwide strike with people on the outside and the inside. I was fortunate enough to come home that year. I was fortunate enough to win my appeal and came home, so I was out here fighting for those inside. And that was very successful. We shut down a lot of stuff. In any war there are going to be casualties, there’s going to be backlash but it was successful in my opinion.

I: It got a lot of outside attention too. As far as prison
organizing goes, there was a lot of press.

K: A lot of celebrities supported it. Ava DuVernay, who did the 13th documentary and When They See Us on the Central Park Five, had a shirt I think at the Oscars or another red-carpet event that said “Abolish Prisons”. I was like, “Oh wow.” And this was in 2018 after the strike. It seemed like everybody was paying attention. That was dope.

I: I don’t think people give enough credit to that 2018 action for breathing a lot of life into the movement.

K: Abolitionists don’t get enough recognition. And I’m cool with it. Even like MDC [Metropolitan Detention Center is a federal jail in Brooklyn, NY]. I had a conversation with one of my friends. He had no idea what was going on, and he was speaking about the MDC situation when they didn’t have water or heat in the Winter and were being mistreated. He was out there protesting, making demands and helping as much as possible. And then the reformists came with the cameras – the media and everything – that’s when now everyone was like, “Oh, MDC is in trouble!” – and we took the back-seat, because now the job was done to get the help for the people. Getting the help for the people - that’s the mission. We don’t really care about the cameras and stuff. That’s the thing, we’re never gonna get credit for stuff that has happened, but they know and we know.

I: That’s such a different way of thinking about it. Not even trying to get that credit, but to strategically call attention to something, get the people in who are going to shine a light onto it, and then move on, because there are other places where the same situation is happening. The 2018 campaign happened in Black August specifically from August 21st to September 9th. Can you tell us why that was?

K: Yes, definitely. The reasons why the campaign was between these two dates, were that on August 21st 1971 there was a rebellion in San Quentin, and September 9th is the date of the Attica riot. Those two dates that represent historical moments for incarcerated people and enslaved people which we celebrate. Black August is significant. I’m trying to get people to understand how much more important Black August is than February. I celebrate Black August as Black history month more than February. For these reasons: Black August began in the California prison system as a way to honor George Jackson, Jonathan Jackson, William Christmas and Ruchell Magee. Jonathan Jackson was George Jackson’s little brother. He was so revolutionary at a young age as well. He decided to take matters into his own hands to try and free his brother. He took over the courtroom and kidnapped the judge and a few other people and tried his best to free the prisoners. Unfortunately, it didn’t happen, but that started off something really big. The month of August is also so important because the first Africans that were brought to Jamestown in 1619 was in August, the underground railroad started on August 2nd 1850, even the reformist MLK walked the March on Washington in August as well (in 1963), Gabriel Prosser’s slave rebellion was in August, and Nat Turner’s rebellion was in August 1831, the Watts rebellion was in August, The MOVE bombing was in August, and Fred Hampton was born in August. So there’s so much that happened in the month of August, and that’s why we celebrate and honor it. All this is so significant. Not only just to incarcerated brothers and sisters, but out here as well – there are a lot of freedom fighters who were born and died in August. People should look into this history. This year, use Black August as the time to read these people’s work. These are legends. Black August is dope.

I: One of the things we find inside is that younger people are down, are open to the ideas, but some of them don’t know the history yet. The way that you see yourself
connected to this history – connected to Mumia, connected to Angela, is a major goal for this whole project for us. So what are IWOC’s plans for Black August 2020?

**K:** We are doing a campaign around PMOs – Prison Made Objects. We played around with the term GMO – Genetically Made Object, and came up with PMO. That is a project we are doing. We are trying to find as many companies and corporations who have their products made by prisoners, and we’re gonna apply as much pressure as possible to them, and we’re gonna try and get that shut down all together. I mean think of the wages for people inside. Incarcerated people get paid like 10 cents per hour to make TVs, license plates, and in New York, lockers, tables and a lot of stuff that are used in schools and offices including non-profit offices. So we’re trying to gather as much information as possible on these companies so that we can apply pressure to them. There are people out here who are making billions of dollars on incarcerated slave labor. We’re gonna try to shut it down.

**I:** Do you have any closing reflections or anything that you want to say to our incarcerated readers, who are learning about abolition?

**K:** I’ll just say that we do have a study group that we’re starting back up as we speak – an inside/outside study group. Maybe we can politicize each other. We can help each other. That’s what the study group is about. We’re gonna pick a book, and sections of a book, and start with that. We have the PMO research project coming along. We have connections with a few high schools and some students have been helping us as well. It’s not just IWOC. We have high school students helping with the PMO research. This is something that is gonna get big. And for people that are trying to organize and practice abolition inside, I’ll say this: It starts with reading. Read as much as possible on this. You need to read Karl Marx. I love Fidel Castro.

You read all these people that have these socialist ideas, because I believe that socialism is as close to abolition as any of the political lines that exist, and you start speaking. You have to get out there in the yard. You have to just throw ideas at people, and not everybody is going to listen. It’s not gonna be like George Jackson, when you get a whole jail following you. It’s not gonna be like that. Because we live in a different time. However, there will be a few people who are gonna listen to you. Those are the people that you organize, revolutionaries, and build something with to make a change. You have to read as much as possible: George Jackson, Karl Marx obviously, and you have to read and get out and have conversations and figure out what’s bothering people inside. And prepare yourself. To be an abolitionist is hard work. It’s 24/7. You have to be angry all the time. James Baldwin says: “To be a Black man in America is to be in a constant state of rage.” I love that quote. I use that quote for everybody. He’s Black of course, so he speaks specifically about and for us, but it also makes sense for abolitionists as well. To be an abolitionist, you have to be in a constant stage of rage. Because you can’t see this shit and not be angry. You can’t not get upset seeing people in prison. You can’t not be upset with the police brutality and killing that they are doing. That has to bother you. And until that happens then nothing will ever change. When you get that upset, you will actually get out and have these conversations with people.

**I:** One last question: Any other info about reaching out to IWOC or becoming a member?

**K:** Yes. People can write me any time if they want to speak with me specifically, or if they want to have a conversation over the phone. [IWOC’s address is listed at the top of this interview]

**I:** Thank you, Kevin.
Pod-Seed / A note about mail

Thank you to all our incarcerated readers who have been writing in with kind words and suggestions. Your letters sustain us! But we don’t yet have the capacity to respond to every letter. So, if you don’t get a reply, don’t despair and please, keep writing! We read everything.

We know that many of you need more consistent outside support and dialogue. So we are going to try something out: a small pen-pal matching service for *In The Belly* readers called **Pod-Seed**. We are specifically looking to match people inside with supporters outside to form relationships for mutual political education to strengthen organizing on both sides of the wall.

This could mean someone to work over ideas with, do readings with, and someone to both teach and learn from. It could mean an abolitionist on the outside who you can report about conditions to. Someone to help you get a reading group off the ground.

About Pod-Seed:

- We are not facilitating romantic relationships, and we ask everyone involved to respect that as a firm boundary.
- We are open to all incarcerated readers, and to free-world abolitionist comrades.
- This is an experiment, so we appreciate your patience.
- We have a limited pen-pal pool, and therefore we are limited in our ability to match people according to desired attributes and demographics.
- This is about facilitating and growing the inside-outside comradeship that is vital to our movement.

- We ask that incarcerated readers, who already have strong abolitionist support systems, give us time to first pair up comrades who have smaller support systems.
- For our LGBTQ comrades both inside and outside, who seek a pen pal relationship with another member of the community, we strongly encourage you to also check out **Black and Pink** (see more info on Black and Pink on p. 70!)

How to sign up:

If you are incarcerated, reading this, and want a penpal, write to us!
Tell us the following information:

- Name, pronouns (fx. he/she/they), age
- Anything you feel like sharing about yourself!
- Briefly: What does abolition mean to you?
- What do you need from a pen pal?
- What’s your preferred method of communication (letters, emails, calls, etc)?

And we will share your contact information with a person on the outside who will write you a note.
Any City USA (Dedicated to Oscar Grant)

by Kenneth West

Me...
African American of Hispanic
   Six feet tall
      Over two hundred pounds
         Walking
            Thinking

Minding my own business

You...
Officer
   With a grudge
      Riding...
         Looking at me

Me...
   Knowing what’s next
      Officer...
         Stopping car
            Me...
               Thinking this shit gone too far

Confrontation...
   Read, extermination!

Officer...
   Black male down

D.A...
   Justifiable homicide

Any City, USA

Resources

True Leap Press
True Leap Press sends out free radical zines to incarcerated comrades! To request a catalog of more than 150 zines on prison abolition, write to us and let us know you want one and we’ll send it out. When you have the catalog, just write in and tell us which ones you want. Some of the zines are original work, and some are great adaptations of classic works by Black radicals like Angela Y. Davis and George Jackson.
In The Belly/True Leap Press
PO Box 67
Ithaca, NY 14851

Critical Resistance/The Abolitionist
Critical Resistance is an organization that has been a central part of the struggle to abolish the Prison-Industrial Complex for 20 years. Their quarterly newspaper, The Abolitionist, is free to incarcerated readers. Write to them to get subscribed!
The Abolitionist
1904 Franklin St, Ste 504
Oakland, CA 94612

A Jailhouse Lawyer’s Manual
A Jailhouse Lawyer’s Manual (11th Ed, 2017, 1288 pages, $30) is a handbook of legal rights and procedures designed to inform prisoners of their rights and how to use judicial process to secure these rights on both the federal and state level, with an emphasis on New York State law. It also has published state supplements for Louisiana, Texas, and an Immigration & Consular Access Supplement (102 pages) containing information about the immigration law consequences of criminal convictions for people who are not U.S. Citizens. For incarcerated persons, the Eleventh Edition of the main JLM is $30; the Louisiana State Supplement is $25; the Texas Supplement is $20; and the Immigration & Consular Access Supplement is $15. To obtain the order form, send a pre-addressed stamped envelope to:
ABO believes our interpersonal and societal issues can be solved without locking people in cages. Our mission is to combat the culture that treats humans as disposable and disproportionately criminalizes the most marginalized amongst us. Through artistic activism, we hope to proliferate the idea that a better world means redefining our concepts of justice.

- We help give a platform to marginalized community members inside prison and a way to express themselves artistically
- We work closely with incarcerated LGBTQ+ members to develop artwork & provide feedback so that artists can hone their skills
- We help introduce the public to the plight of queer prisoners
- We fundraise for and provide financial assistance to our contributors and other LGBTQ+ prisoners in need
- We create and maintain LGBTQ+ community contact and friendship across prison walls
- We support LGBTQ+ prisoners to gain knowledge and experience in the publishing/artistic industry
- We provide artists with credentials for a portfolio and letters of recommendation (for parole boards, etc.)
- We introduce prisoners to other organizations that may assist them with needs or publish their work
- We engage with the local community at events (workshops, book and zinefests)
- We collaborate and work in solidarity with other prisoner advocacy/abolitionist groups.

Black and Pink
Black & Pink is a national prison abolitionist organization dedicated to dismantling the criminal punishment system and the harms caused to LGBTQ+ people and people living with HIV/AIDS who are affected by the system through advocacy, support, and organizing. Black & Pink coordinates a nationwide PenPal program in which we match incarcerated members with penpals who correspond, build relationships, and participate in harm reduction and affirmation. Black & Pink also distributes a nationwide Newsletter free of charge to incarcerated LGBTQ+ folks and folks living with HIV/AIDS. If you’re interested in participating in the Black & Pink PenPal program or receiving their Newsletter, please send your name (legal name and correct name, if different), pronouns, DOC #, and prison name and address to:

Black and Pink
6223 Maple St #4600
Omaha, NE 68104

ABO Comix
ABO is a collective of creators and activists who work to amplify the voices of LGBTQ prisoners through art. By working closely with prison abolitionist and queer advocacy organizations, we aim to keep queer prisoners connected to outside community and help them in the fight toward liberation. The profits we generate go back to incarcerated artists, especially those with little to no resources. Using the DIY ideology of "punk-zine" culture, ABO was formed with the philosophy of mutual support, community and friendship.

Our collective is working towards compassionate accountability without relying on the state or its sycophants.

Don’t ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going.
- Harriet Tubman
Write for Village X

Write for In The Belly!

Send us some of your abolitionist writing and artwork!

We are eager to publish the work of incarcerated writers, artists, intellectuals and organizers. At the moment, we are unable to pay you for your labor, as we only have enough money for printing and postage.

Our still-developing guidelines on publication are:

1. All work must be abolitionist, or reflecting serious engagement with abolition.
2. This means that we will never publish work reflecting harmful positions, such as racism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, or ableism.
3. We will not publish work that we believe puts anyone inside at risk of any sort of harmful retaliation.
4. We prioritize first-time publishers.
5. We strongly encourage dialogue—responses to previous articles, critiques made in good faith, and questions asked in earnest and with care.

We are already getting a lot of great submissions. So if you sent something and haven’t heard back yet, thank you for your patience! We will be in touch soon.