

Black Liberation and the Abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex

October 12, 2016



Rachel Herzing lives and works in Oakland, CA, where she fights the violence of policing and imprisonment. She is a co-founder of Critical Resistance, a national grassroots organization dedicated to abolishing the prison industrial complex and the Co-Director of the StoryTelling & Organizing Project, a community resource sharing stories of interventions to interpersonal harm that do not rely on policing, imprisonment, or traditional social services. The following interview was conducted by the True Leap Publishing Collective.

True Leap Press (TLP): Hi Rachel, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. We are excited to have you as a contributor in this inaugural edition of Propter Nos. Our publishing collective thinks the specific timing of this issue is important to highlight, as it is set to be released in the closing days of Black August. Could you possibly explain what Black August is for our readers, and why it is so important for people to recognize today?

Rachel: Black August is a call for reflection, study, and action to promote Black liberation. Its roots go back to California prisons in the 1970s, during a period of sustained struggle and resistance against racialized violence against Black imprisoned people, especially those calling for Black liberation and challenging state power. Ignited by the deaths of Jonathan and George Jackson in August 1970 and August 1971, and honoring others who gave their lives including Khatari Gualden, William Christmas and James McClain, a group of imprisoned people came together to develop a means of honoring that sacrifice and promoting Black liberation. While August is significant because of the deaths of the Jackson brothers, it is also a month with many other significant moments in Black history in the United States including the formation of the Underground Railroad, Nat Turner's rebellion, the March on Washington, and the Watts uprising, to name just a few. So there was an idea that this could be a time that imprisoned people in the California prison system could use for reflection, study, and to think about how to strengthen their struggles. During the month, people wouldn't use radios or television, would fast between sun up and sun down, and practice other measures of self-discipline. Eventually the commemorations during that month were taken up outside of prisons, too. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement became the stewards of the commemoration outside prisons, although many people honor and celebrate this legacy and the

roots of the practice. Black August is important to commemorate (and I hope that the variety of ways that people commemorate that legacy can be nurtured and encouraged), in part, because it connects imprisoned organizers and revolutionaries with communities outside of prisons that are struggling for similar things. It's often the case that imprisoned communities are meant to be invisible, and essentially cut off from non-imprisoned communities, especially communities of struggle. I think that is an important reason to reflect, as well as to study and honor the sacrifices Black revolutionaries have made over centuries and recommit ourselves to the struggle. Black August provides one important vehicle for doing that.

TLP: On this note, how did the contemporary prison and policing abolition movement emerge? What are some of the major theoretical and historical connections existing between abolitionism in its current iterations and these earlier articulations of the Black/Prisoner liberation struggle just mentioned?

Rachel: Well I think the periodization probably depends on who you talk to. So since you're talking to me, you're going to get something pretty specific [laughter]. I think it also depends on what you mean by "contemporary." In my mind, there is a long through line of people fighting particularly for the abolition of imprisonment that goes back to Eastern State Penitentiary, which was the first modern day US prison. That was in Philadelphia, 1829. Almost immediately, the Quakers, who played a role in building this institution to encourage reflection, understood that this was a mistake. And Quakers ever since that time have been on the frontline of advocating for the abolition of imprisonment. So there is that old-timey version of it, which links back to the development and the build up of penitentiaries as institutions of containment and human control.

If you jump ahead to the 1970s and 1980s, you begin to see organizations that are fighting for a moratorium on prison construction, but also groups advocating actively for the abolition of imprisonment. For instance, there is a book that came out during this period called Instead of Prisons, originally published in 1976, by a group called Prison Research Education Action Project (PREAP). At that time, they were looking at a national prison population that was 250,000. They thought surely this is a tipping point, we need to take action now. And so, as we know, the imprisoned population in the US is now nearly 2.3 million. So this struggle dates back, then, to the seventies and eighties, and became somewhat quieter in certain periods, but never completely went away.

1998 is another important year: the founding Critical Resistance (CR) conference was held in Berkeley that year. That conference did some work to reinvigorate the concept of abolition, and not just as a thing to organize around intellectually, but to organize campaigns and projects around, as well. It also introduced the concept of the prison industrial complex (PIC) into a more popular consciousness. While that conference didn't form some kind of modern abolitionist movement, it did reignite an energy that may have been less prominent or less active just prior to it. That conference was still very focused on imprisonment and it wasn't until 2001, when Critical Resistance East happened that there was a really strong attention toward thinking about the abolition of the prison industrial complex as a whole. That was kind of at the forefront of what that conference was all about.

I think today, and since becoming an organization in 2001, CR plays a particular role in advocating for the abolition of the entire system—of the entire prison industrial complex—rather than just being a prison abolition organization. CR was really at the forefront in the early 2000s as an organization advocating for the abolition of policing, too. Nowadays you hear a lot more people talking about policing itself as something to fight, as opposed to resisting its function within the PIC or even just its relation to imprisonment. It is more common these days for people to think about ways to live without some idea that law enforcement is a kind of natural feature of our world.

So I think there is a through line there from early Quaker opposition to imprisonment to the contemporary movement for PIC abolition. And like all movements, there are some ebbs and flows to it, but those are some of the key markers that I would use to talk about its development.

TLP: What exactly brought you into the abolitionist movement? Do you identify as an abolitionist, or is this one aspect of a larger, overarching framework which informs your praxis?

Rachel: I think it is both. I definitely identify as a prison industrial complex abolitionist. I do that work because I believe in the liberation of Black people and I think that it is one of the foremost ways to see that broader goal fulfilled. Without the abolitionist movement and without a commitment to ending mass criminalization, containment, and death of Black people, I don't think Black liberation is possible in the United States—or elsewhere, frankly. So I come to this work as a survivor of sexual harm and law enforcement harm who doesn't believe the PIC makes me any safer, and as somebody who is committed to the liberation of Black people.

TLP: You alluded earlier to the differences between a politics of gradualist police and prison reform and a prison-industrial-complex abolitionist praxis. What are your thoughts on framing political struggle in terms of either “abolition” or “reform”? Are there not limitations to framing the conversation in this way?

Rachel: I don't think it's very useful to position those as binaries. I think it's more about different end games. Back in the early 2000s, Critical Resistance started using a framework that a lot of people are using now, and almost never credit CR by the way (which I hope just means it has permeated the common sense and not that people simply don't credit CR [laughter]). We started saying that the distinction between abolitionists and reformers (or people who either have abolition as their end goal or reform as their end goal) is that reformers tend to see the system as broken—something that can be fixed with some tweaks or some changes. Whereas abolitionists think that the system works really well. They think that the PIC is completely efficient in containing, controlling, killing, and disappearing the people that it is meant to. Even if it might sweep up additional people in its wake, it is very, very effective at doing the work it's meant to do. So rather than improving a killing machine, an abolitionist goal would be to try and figure out how to take incremental steps—a screw here, a cog there—and make it so the system cannot continue—so it ceases to exist—rather than improving its efficiency. Whereas reformers, with criminal justice reform being their end goal, believe there is something worth improving there. So the groups have different end games.

I have never understood or participated in moves toward abolition that didn't take steps of some sort. A reform is just a change, right? So there can be negative reforms and there can be positive reforms. You can make a change that entrenches the system, improves its ability to function, increases its legitimacy, so: a non- abolitionist goal. Or, you can take an incremental step that steals some of the PIC's power, makes it more difficult to function in the future, or decreases its legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

I think the false distinction between reform and abolition assumes that there is some kind of pure vision that doesn't require strategy or incremental moves. If it is possible to get everybody to open all prison doors wide today, fantastic! If it is not, then what can we do to chip away, chip away, chip away so that the PIC doesn't have the ability to continually increase its power or deepen its reach and hold on our lives?

TLP: What do you see being the most significant overlaps between: the past two decades of abolitionist organizing, “Black Lives Matter,” and the movement for Black lives in its current phase? I know it's a messy question, because there are folks at the forefront who are situated both ideologically and physically at the intersections between each. Maybe a better way to phrase it is: do

you see any tensions or contradictions between the abolitionist work that has unfolded over the past two decades and the emergent Black-led political forms taking shape today?

Rachel: First off, I want to be very clear: I cannot speak for Black Lives Matter. I'm not a member of Black Lives Matter, I'm not involved in that organization, and do not have the ability to speak on their strategy or form. But I know there is a distinction between them and the Movement for Black Lives, which is a network of nearly sixty Black-led organizations across the US that came together to meet first in Cleveland, and then out of that, have continued to work together. And Black Lives Matter is one of those organizations. The Movement for Black Lives recently released this policy platform, titled [A Vision for Black Lives](#), with more than thirty policy pieces in it.

I guess I would say a few things to this question: First, I think that what we are seeing emerge today—what I would loosely call a Black protest movement, which includes a lot of these organizations and formations just mentioned—would have actually been impossible to come out in the way that it has (to have the foundation to stand on and to have people move in the way that they have) if there hadn't been growing movements against imprisonment and policing in the United States over the previous two decades. I don't know if there is a single set of politics within Black Lives Matter (and I know it's not true within the Movement for Black Lives) that compels an abolitionist orientation towards their work. I think there are some people who lean that way and I think there are some people who lean other ways and I think there are a variety of political perspectives and orientations that I've seen emerge from this broader network. I guess, at various points, I've been surprised that so little attention has been paid to the decades of work (well actually centuries of work, but recent decades in particular) done by Black people and Black organizations to fight the violence of policing in the United States; especially when the protest movement jumped off. I understand that people participating in that protest were fueled in no small part by outrage and in just complete disbelief at the scale and scope of the violence, and that people are being activated and drawn out for the first time. There are some who felt compelled to action right away and weren't necessarily connected to those other organizations or movements.

I think as the past two years have unfolded I've seen, particularly in the Movement for Black Lives, some of that leadership and some of those organizations doing good study, thinking about other Black liberationist platforms, thinking about the histories of Black struggle around a variety of other issues and really broadening their understanding of the violence facing Black people. That is, not only issues surrounding the prison industrial complex, but also the economic, social, and political features of it. I don't know that there is a direct relationship between the previous decades of work—and again, I mean prior work along the spectrum from abolitionist to moderate reform—and these new Black protest formations. I think there is probably overlap of people, probably some overlap of thinking, and probably some overlap of strategy. But I don't know if they are in direct relationship to each other. I would say that while there can be no doubt that Black Lives Matter has had unprecedented cultural significance and impact on US popular culture (on US media and the cultural life of people in the states and globally), it is less clear to me what the organizing impact will be. And in a place like Oakland where I live, there are strong organizations with decades of strong organizing going back to the Panthers and before that set the stage differently than what might be true for other places that have a different history. So I think the longer term impacts of this most recent activism on the power of the prison industrial complex over Black lives (and the lives of people of color and Indigenous people more generally) has yet to be seen. That said, I think there has been a change in the conversation. I think there is no doubt that there is a really significant cultural impact, even though some of it is still in the making.

TLP: How do you understand the prisoner hunger strikes and other prisoner-led activisms that have occurred over the past decade in relationship to such mobilizations against policing and criminalization in the so-called "free world"?

Rachel: I think it depends on how you define mobilizations in the free world. I think there is a strong movement outside of prisons and jails. Sometimes it gets more attention and sometimes it gets less attention, but I think it has sustained. I don't necessarily think that is the same thing as this Black protest strain. Again, there are overlapping people and overlapping players and that sort of thing, but I have yet to see (which again, isn't to say that it couldn't happen) an engagement or activism beyond direct action that has meaningfully connected to more sustained organizing around imprisonment.

So I'm not sure that it's fair necessarily to say "they're not doing a good job," because I'm not sure that's their goal, right? I think the goal is a much more media focused one. With that being said, I think there is what I would call (and this is me showing my age and crabbiness about social media) an overreliance on social media which has meant that a lot of people are just left out. I personally have the luxury to make choices about being on social media or not and the choice to opt out of certain types of feeds of information and conversations. But there are many people who are living in cages who don't have access to social media. And even for those who do, they might not have access to it in the same real-time that people living outside of cages do. A lot of that organizing, a lot of that conversation happens over Twitter, happens via Facebook, happens via Instagram. So there are potentially millions of people who don't have a voice in the conversation. Which is not to say that all imprisoned people are not finding ways to participate. There are many who are finding ways to engage. It's complicated to organize with imprisoned people and there are all kinds of structural and institutional barriers to doing that. Like I was saying, the system is set up to make people who live in cages invisible and disappeared. So it's not without all kinds of challenges. And again, I don't know necessarily if that's their intention or that's what the mobilizations against policing are set up to do.

But to return to the movement that is meant to do that and is engaged in all of that: the 2011 and 2013 prisoner-led hunger strikes in California really re-energized the movement outside of prisons and jails and activated a lot of people. The strikes gave an injection of energy. Part of that was the inspiration of the leadership of people who are imprisoned in solitary confinement, living under the most excruciating conditions that human beings can imagine. They managed to study together, build bridges across the racial divides that are perpetually stoked by the prison regimes, and were able to engage people outside of cages to take up this call to end indefinite solitary confinement—to get people in conditions that they could actually live and fight from. The work of people imprisoned inside of Pelican Bay, Corcoran, High Desert, Folsom . . . wherever they are living and working, really, was a shot in the arm for the outside movement. And I think that's sustained and spread. California isn't the only place, and California wasn't the first place. You also see Alabama, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Washington, and others. In these places you see imprisoned people using this last resort, their own bodies, to highlight just how excruciating and torturous these conditions actually are.

Pieces like the agreement to End Hostilities that came out of the California prison system and was then taken up by other communities across the state and nationally is an important organizing tool. It refocuses attention to the fact that people are always struggling inside. There are also imprisoned people who are behind the elimination of the use of sterilization on people in women's prisons, working to increase visitation or organizing against prison and jail expansion or construction. Imprisoned organizers are important players in all of these campaigns and many more.

TLP: So, to shift gears a bit, how do you suggest we think about the relationship between struggles against the aforementioned aspects of state-condoned racist domestic warfare *within* US borders and the numerous declared and undeclared imperialist wars abroad?

Rachel: There can be no doubt that there is a direct relationship between war-making at home and war-making abroad. While I do not use the word "war" lightly in the domestic context (and I know its

articulations are different here than in theaters of combat in places like Afghanistan or Iraq), I do think that it is an appropriate term to use regarding the genocidal practices at home—going back to the first attempts to exterminate Indigenous people from this land, to the ongoing structural and actual physical violence used to eliminate peoples' access and opportunity to have meaningful, healthy lives. There are some concrete overlaps. There are overlapping technologies, for instance. The weaponized drone that was recently used to kill Micah Johnson in Dallas has been used in Iraq; surveillance technologies once tested out in such theaters of war are used regularly by domestic law enforcement; data collection methods used there are also used here; etc.

I think it is oversimplified to just say: "Oh, well did you know the military is giving extra equipment to law enforcement?" That's true and that's a scandal. But that is merely a sliver of where the overlap of interests and warfare practices is happening. The people who are designing war to take place in spaces outside of the United States are influencing the tactics of law enforcement here in the United States. I think you can look at the borders as one of those places where that stuff coalesces strongly. However this is also happening in cities, in counties, and rural areas across the country. There's also a way that the logic of law enforcement in the United States is taking on an increasingly explicit war-making tenor. There are very clear examples of this such as the declared War on Drugs or War on Gangs. The enforcement of these wars uses a lot of the same tactics and technologies, but also is premised on a sense that there is an enemy that needs to be targeted and eliminated here at home.

One way this has played out dramatically is with the creation and growth of the Department of Homeland Security since September 11th and the fear-mongering around terrorism that's used to clamp down on the domestic setting. One small example of this that we have been fighting in Oakland is a program called Urban Shield. It is 48 hours of war games simulations and trainings for SWAT and other special law enforcement forces. The scenarios are incredibly racist, really sensationalized, and millions upon millions of dollars of my county's money go into these war game competitions. Simultaneously, they hold a trade expo, so you can go and get the latest night-vision goggles, the newest guns, the latest tracking softwares or stingray technology, or robots and drones. In terms of its cultural impact, in this period of increased public attention on the policing of protest you'll also see things like t-shirts with things like images of protesters in cross-hairs for sale at these tradeshow.

TLP: While we are on this topic of repression, counterinsurgency warfare, and police spying, could you speak a little bit on the politics of movement security? I don't mean this as a reiteration of criminological notions of security and securitization. I simply mean, are there certain principles, organizing strategies, or ways of collectivizing political labor that you suggest be embraced, at both organizational and larger popular levels, which can stave off intrusion from the state or the counterrevolutionary aspirations of liberal civil society?

Rachel: This is definitely not my area of expertise [laughter], but I'll tell you what I think [more laughter]. I think organizers should always operate on the assumption that they're being watched, that their communication is being monitored, and that they likely will encounter people intent on provoking people and sharing information to discredit and disrupt organizing, particularly organizing that challenges state power. That said, I think being smart and cognizant of that is different than being paralyzed and paranoid.

My sense is that strong organizations are a good line of self-defense. Strong organizations, strong coalitions, and strong networks. Trying to go it alone, as individuals or as a handful of people is always more risky than being connected to an organizing infrastructure and a base. But people make different choices about what their tactics require and what they think is strategic. I feel quite certain that when things get more powerful they get more closely monitored. That balance between moving

forward toward political goals and using common sense caution is really important. I think calling out and not cooperating with law enforcement always makes really good sense to me [laughter]. Calling out visits by law enforcement, not cooperating, and then letting people know that it's happening—those kinds of things are extremely important. Having consistency in how people get to enter spaces, when people get to participate in decision-making, those basic organizing guidelines used by many organizations for a long time, is also important.

TLP: So in the spirit of Black August, we have pulled three quotes from Assata Shakur's autobiography that we hope to get your opinion on. The first is as follows:

I have never really understood exactly what a "liberal" is, though, since i have heard "liberals" express every conceivable opinion on every conceivable subject. As far as i can tell, you have extreme right, who are fascist, racist capitalist dogs like Ronald Reagan, who come right out and let you know where they're coming from. And on the opposite end, you have the left, who are supposed to be committed to justice, equality, and human rights. And somewhere in between these two points is the liberal. As far as i'm concerned, "liberal" is the most meaningless word in the dictionary. History has shown me that as long as some white middle-class people can live high on the hog, take vacations to Europe, send their children to private schools, and reap the benefits of their white skin privileges, then they are "liberals." But when times get hard and money gets tight they pull off that liberal mask and you think you're talking to Adolph Hitler. They feel sorry for the so-called underprivileged just as long as they can maintain their own privileges.

What comes to mind after hearing this quote?

Rachel: I think it's an interesting point. In the movement against the prison industrial complex we have struggled a lot with . . . umm . . . liberals [laughter]— some of the most stalwart reformers where reform is their end game. I also think there is some interesting wiggle room there. What is necessary to fulfill their commitment to justice, and equality, and human rights? I mean, if there is a kernel of that there, then part of our work as organizers is to amplify our shared interests, to compel them in that direction, and also to make that compelling. That doesn't mean we always succeed or that their class interests, racial benefits, gender benefits or other sources of power they want to protect might not ultimately play them one way or the other. But thinking about where can we exploit that kernel of shared interest is interesting to me here, rather than just giving up and writing them off entirely. Of course we need to be cautious of what they are recommending and what they think is "practical" or "pragmatic." But it's our job now to push on that and to make other suggestions.

TLP: Here is the second quote:

Constructive criticism and self-criticism are extremely important for any revolutionary organization. Without them, people tend to drown in their mistakes, and not learn from them.

Rachel: Yes. I couldn't agree more [laughter]. So yes, what Assata said [more laughter]. I worry a little bit, in this period, about a lack of intellectual rigor and lack of discipline, as well as accusations of working "too slowly" or "not understanding" the sense of urgency. You know, we saw this similarly around the rise of the anti- globalization movement which I also think is a direct antecedent

of what we are seeing in terms of Black protest today. Similarly, I would say that about Occupy. I would call that a direct antecedent. I don't think we would be seeing what we are seeing now without those previous movements.

TLP: Like a tactical antecedent? Or something more ideological?

Rachel: I think both. But I don't mean a one-to-one overlap, or like: this led directly to this. But more in terms of some of the orientations towards organizing and the ideological parallels. So definitely not a one-to-one, but I think influenced by quite certainly.

I think in these moments where there is a heightened investment in direct action as the primary way to move, the pacing and the urgency and all that is required to keep up the pace sometimes makes it challenging to engage people in longer term planning, or study, or assessment. Because people are really feeling like there is no time to do that. That said, if you don't engage with decades of previous organizing, if you don't engage with where you are falling down, then you will make the same mistakes over and over. You will make mistakes made a month ago. You will make mistakes that were made ten years ago. You might make those anyways, but they might be more productive mistakes if you've made a commitment to studying movement history. The last thing I'll say about this is that it's also fucking hard. Nobody wants to confront the stuff they've messed up on, or the things they think they've done wrong, not to mention talk about their vulnerabilities. I think that also what Assata is describing is very different than a callout culture that's like "you're fucked" or "let me just describe all the ways that you've messed up." I think what she's talking about is a disciplined assessment and reflection within organizational settings on where we need to improve, where we need to tighten up, and where we need to be stronger and smarter.

TLP: This point on the pace and tempo of struggle is so crucial! I am glad you mention it. There truly is, as you say, this kind of militant presentism (and ahistoricity) unique to the so-called "Left" that is as troubling for movement-builders as the gradualist impulse of liberal antiracist reform. This point also makes for a good transition into our final quote from Shakur, which goes as follows:

Just because you believe in self-defense doesn't mean you let yourself be sucked into defending yourself on the enemy's terms. One of the [Black Panther] party's major weaknesses, i thought, was the failure to clearly differentiate between aboveground political struggle and underground, clandestine military struggle.

Rachel: I believe in self-defense. I think that self-defense and self-determination are really key concepts if Black people want to get free. But also for all people who want to be free. In my mind, there is a certain romanticism of a very fixed and narrow conception of self-defense that I think actually comes from, well . . . actually . . . reading Assata, for instance [laughter]. And that is not to criticize her or people who read her. It's more to say, what does self-defense look like in 2016, versus in 1969 or 1973? In my mind, self-defense requires an understanding of shared fate. It requires an understanding of how what happens in El Salvador or what happens in Palestine or what happens in the Philippines impacts my ability to fight for my own liberation. Some of that has to do with the nature of US imperialism. Some of that also has to do with what we have learned, over many decades, about the power of internationalism generally, and Third World solidarity in particular.

What is required from our organizations or movements in relationship with these sectors internationally needs to be a determining force in how we shift power. Building a sense of how we defend our own abilities to live healthy, meaningful, powerful lives in relationship to people in

similar conditions around the globe is a way of thinking about self-defense that I am interested in exploring further. That includes how we fight US imperialism, or how we fight for food security, or how we fight against large-scale gentrification and the march of capitalism. Toward that end, I think this idea of not being sucked into defending ourselves on the enemy's terms is important. Building these networks I've been describing is one way of determining our own course. It allows us to be proactive instead of only defensive. It allows us to say: "this is what we want to build." In a lot of ways an abolitionist vision is an example of this kind of proactive vision. It's not just: "I want to eliminate imprisonment" or "I want to eliminate the cops." It really is an affirmative ideology and practice. Affirmatively, this is the world I want to live in, therefore I need to take these steps to create the conditions that make that world possible.

Originally published here.