

7 Lessons in 1 Abolitionist Notebook: Joy James on Abolition

“When you kill a living being, you kill yourself and everyone else as well.”

—Thich Nhat Hahn

I was introduced to prison abolitionism when asked to organize a 1998 prototype for Critical Resistance (<http://criticalresistance.org/>) at CU-Boulder. Alongside several thousand attendees at the “Unfinished Liberation” conference, I learned about the prison industrial complex. Below are 7 lessons studied there and elsewhere.

#1. The parental ethos of academic bodies filters professionalism and conformity into activism; and veils inherent contradictions. When few pro-radical public platforms critique progressivism, little value is recognized left of the “left.” Radical analyses are then dismissed as anti-progressive distractions aiding the repressive right. With public transparency, historical abolitionists debated strategies across the ideological spectrum; this likely enhanced their effectiveness.

#2. Black political prisoners received the anthology from the 1998 prison conference with “thank you” notes remarking the disappearance of their agency. They thus inspired future anthologies, shaped by students, of the writings of captive revolutionaries. Unlike the mass of the incarcerated, imprisoned radical activists cannot be easily portrayed (or led) as a purely victim caste. Influenced by decades of captivity and violent trauma, their intellectualism offers analyses assimilated into (and altered by) progressivism’s multi-cultural reforms.

#3. On the political continuum, US conservative-centrist-progressive “advocacy democracy” works for reforms with an anti-black racism that structured democracy’s evolution through: an *anti-abolitionist* revolutionary war that blocked the expansion of the 1772 Somerset ruling (emancipating a black slave brought to Britain from colonial America); an *anti-abolitionist* 13th amendment that codifies slavery to prison; an *anti-abolitionist* 14th amendment that transfers black political personhood (and social standing) to corporations.

#4. On continuum, extreme political positions *appear* as essential differences. On-continuum reforms (such as decarceration) diversify elites in government, corporate, nonprofit, academic and policing sectors; they do not decentralize power or custodial care. Leaning into privileged structures, that historically create, manage, tabulate, or ameliorate crises, requires leaning back from the control and radicalism of those most vulnerable to police and prison violence.

#5. Popularizing prison/police abuses through books and reports, television series and podcasts appears to deflect from off-continuum resistance and theories of “revolution,” “rebellion,” and “violence in both resistance and repression.

#6. Off-continuum grief and suprarational demands to state authorities—“Resurrect the children you kill”—exceed the capacities of on-continuum politics.

#7. Expanding capacities for change, off-continuum “leaderless” maroons—policed or captive youth, black-identified, queer, maternals calling out “Black Love”—save their own lives and enable those of others.

—Joy James

[This post is part of a series of “Abolition Statements”

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