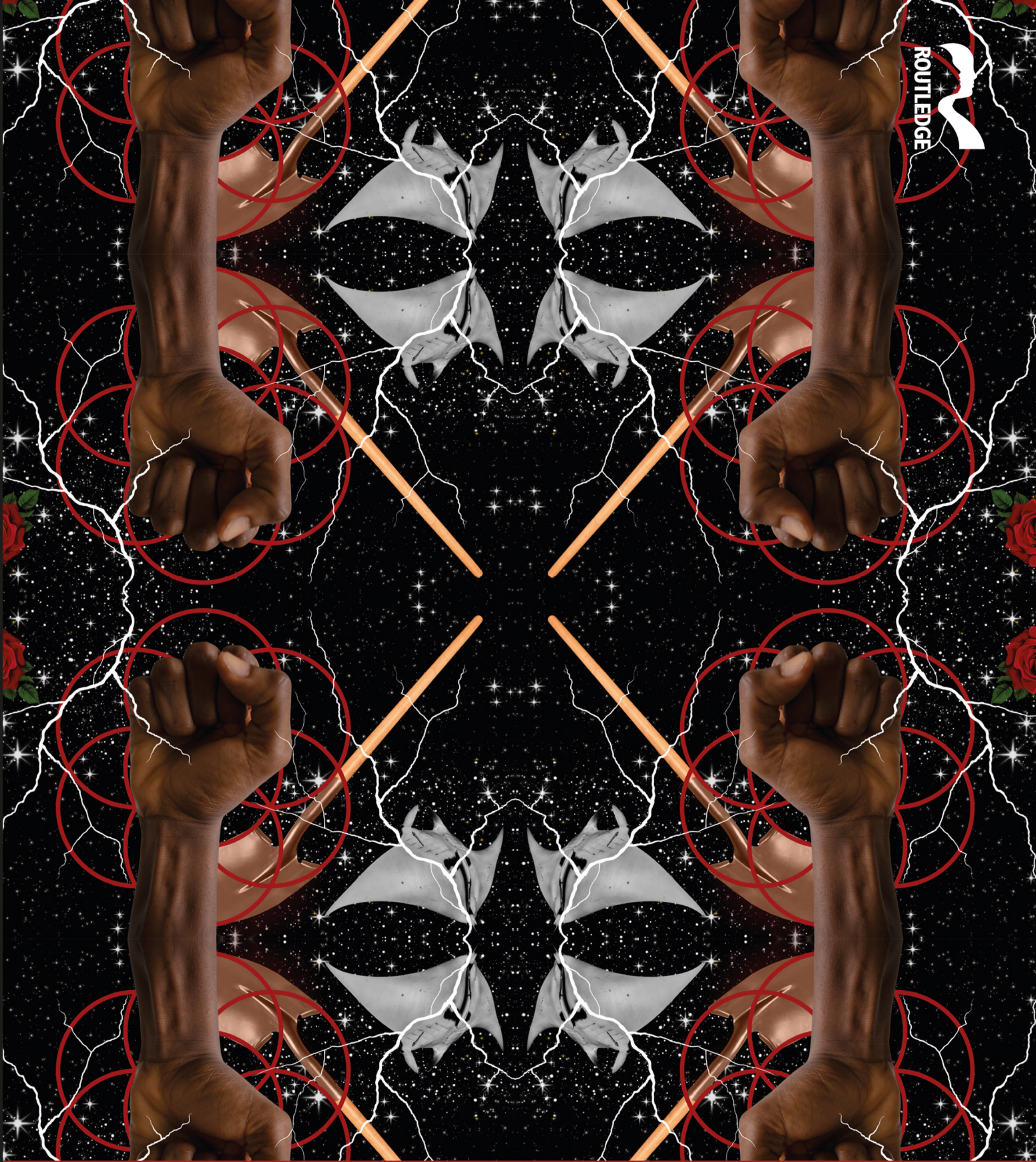


# INTO ABOLITIONIST THEATRE

## A Guidebook for Liberatory Theatre-making

Edited by Rivka Eckert

# INTO ABOLITIONIST THEATRE

Seeking to transform community-based theatre-making, this book explores the transformative potential of abolitionist theatre, as theatre artists and teachers collaborate with marginalized communities to challenge systems of oppression and inspire profound societal change.

Focusing on the idea of bringing people together to demand collective care and community-led practice, this collection works to define theatre's role in the goals of abolition. Abolitionist theatre-making is a theatre that is connected to the practice of decolonization, intersectional feminism, climate justice, social justice, and liberation struggles. Exploring these ideas and offering a direct exploration of the questions that theatre artists and teachers should ask themselves when evaluating the abolitionist impact of their work, the volume provides accessible and practical tools for theatre-makers with perspectives from working practitioners throughout. Through real-life stories and experiences shared by theatre practitioners, the book provides a rich and diverse tapestry of examples that highlight the ways in which community-based theatre can contribute to transformational change. Readers will benefit from practical frameworks, thought-provoking perspectives, and thoughtfully crafted insights that inspire them to reimagine their own theatre practices and empower them to create theatre that challenges and dismantles oppressive systems while uplifting marginalized voices.

Ideal for undergraduate and graduate students with an interest in utilizing theatre-making for social change, this book offers new and practical insights into how the path to abolition might be laid and theatre's key role in it. This book will also be of great interest to theatre artists and activist practitioners who are involved in community-based theatre projects with marginalized populations.

**Rivka Eckert** is an Assistant Professor in the Theatre and Dance Department at SUNY Potsdam, USA. Eckert is a community cultural development theatre-maker using performing arts as a means of cross-cultural communication. She has taught Theatre and English in prisons, high schools, and middle schools and worked with the Peace Corps in Samoa and Liberia.

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## A Guidebook for Liberatory Theatre-making

*Edited by Rivka Eckert*

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Thank you to my community of chosen family who frequently gave me the gift of a quiet home so I could stare a little bit longer at the editing page. My chosen family are beloved community and I am so grateful for their potlucks and unwavering support.

My deepest gratitude, as always, for my family. Particularly for W.T., B, and Pickles, for reminding me the importance of taking screen breaks to prioritize bike rides in the sunshine.

Lastly, thank you in advance to those of you with eyeballs on these pages. Your curiosity, engagement, and disagreement are what has been pulling me forward. It is my sincerest hope that this collection resonates with you, motivates you toward liberatory experimentations, and that you will keep me in community to share the learnings. Onward!

# INTRODUCTION

*Rivka Eckert*

Naming abolitionist theatre-making feels akin to pinning butterflies to study them; once stuck to a corkboard and labeled, the vitality, movement, and relationships that made flight possible feel suddenly cold, colorless, and utterly un-butterfly-like. Like scientists, we stand over the text and look at what our observation may have destroyed. Like artists, we attempt to resurrect the memories, lessons, and failures of theatre practices so that we may fly better, together.

This book comes at a time necessary for freedom-dreaming and abolitionist imagination. I originally sat to organize the structure for this book during the fall of 2020, but as the COVID-19 pandemic largely shuttered the performing arts and sent theatre-artists into a collective pause, I, too, wondered how this moment demanded a different type of attention from me. Like many other theatre- and culture-makers, I took this pause as a chance to reflect and dream on what the performing arts could recommit to coming out of the pandemic. During the same time, led in large part by the Black organizing efforts of the Movement for Black Lives, catalyzed by police officers' murder of George Floyd, the United States (and its theatre communities) grappled with racial injustice, state-sanctioned violence, and an increasingly militarized police presence. These efforts have shifted the popular understanding of abolition to a position more publicly and politically palatable. At the time of writing this, stories on defunding the police and abolition have appeared in every major US newspaper. Put simply, abolition seems imaginable.

Three years have passed since I sent out the call for proposals for this book. Already, many of the commitments and statements made by theatre companies and theatre-makers have lost momentum and flattened. Theatres struggle to balance their ethical commitments with the need for financial solvency. In the summer of 2023, three major theatre companies announced the need to drastically reduce their

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seasons and lay off employees – the consequences of taking programming risks and the results of gambling on audience's ability and desire to return to the theatre post-pandemic. Similarly, institutions of higher education make cuts aimed toward rightsizing their programs, often targeting programs of performing arts.

Institutions, like those of higher education, driven by the desire to be relevant in a rapidly changing world, are guilty of co-opting the language of change while avoiding the actions required to remove the tentacles of capitalism and the insipid rots of white supremacy, sexism, racism, and ableism, that have long had a chokehold on both higher education and theatre. Alongside palatability comes the exploitation and marketability of abolitionist work and the co-option of the language of abolition.

This book comes at a time ripe for questions and coalition-building. Abolition demands not just the reduction of systems of oppression, but a collective movement toward community investment and healing. This book joins the work of a constellation of abolitionists who recognize that our collective efforts need documentation so that we may learn from one another as we practice a future living in communities full of love, justice, and creativity. There is no singular prescriptive way in which we work toward abolition. In the tradition of Black feminist scholar and reproductive justice activist Loretta Ross, we believe that a group of people who *all* agree are a cult, but when we can disagree and find progress, that is a movement.[1] In fact, the strength of this book lies in its interconnectedness and disagreement. This book offers questions more than a singular answer.

Can theatre-makers adapt to privilege *process* as much as *product*? Is higher education vested in action toward social change or solely in the production of knowledge? Can communities and organizations creating in these spaces ethically straddle the divides, or are scholar/activists constantly armchair-analyzing ineffective projects? How can scholar/activists caught in the divides of theory/no practice or practice/no theory be pulled through? Can abolitionist projects be deemed such if the change is only personal? Given the great unlearnings the fields of theatre and education are faced with, is abolition too far a horizon to see?

This book project works to define theatre's role in the goals of abolition. The authors within this book include descriptions of work taking place within the lands known colonially as the United States (and Tribes) of America, but this is not a geographically unique movement. Although not the focus of this volume, there are theatre-makers, collectives, and organizers using what could be called abolitionist theatre across the globe.

## Who Are You?

The collective of authors writing this book include theatre-makers, formerly and currently incarcerated artists, feminists, those from marginalized identities, those with privilege, mothers, and educators. We are in the practice of asking for more time. We are in the practice of trying to get it a little more right, with each breath.

As the editor and a contributor to the book, I engage in abolitionist practice as a theatre-maker and mother/artist by setting my compass toward community engagement, showing up imperfectly and authentically (Oh! the problems with that word), and choosing to stay in right relationship over ease and the politics of politeness. As a white woman with the financial ability to meet my needs, I have been able to take risks as a theatre-maker and educator. I have been privileged with opportunities for rest, time, and adventure and have been held in communities around the world, from my work with the Peace Corps in Liberia and Samoa, in high schools in Massachusetts, and, since 2016 as a professor in New York State. Home was an old farmhouse in the Pacific Northwest surrounded by tulip fields and rooms filled with books and baskets. I put on a lot of backyard plays with my friends and stuffed animals – which, as I reflect on it now, set the foundation of my commitment toward weaving imagination, the natural world, and stories that connected me to my community.

The first signs of spring in the North Country of New York are emerging as I write this – sump pump pulls melted snow water out from the basement of my almost 200-year-old house. The grit of winter encrusts the entryways and hangs in coat closets and on my children's jackets. Another mass shooting happened yesterday. The headlines share the news of record low levels of Antarctic ice and dead whales washing on shores. There is grief and suffering on a scale that one cannot understand. I resolve myself toward the next word and breath, that they may bring us closer to flourishing. And in the mother/artist spirit, I come to the daily practice and discipline of hope. (borrowing, of course, from Mariame Kaba's "Hope is a discipline.") I ask for the strength to cultivate softness, space for integration, and rest. I offer my time and attention to our collective efforts toward liberation.

While the ideas for this work have been in process for roughly a decade, through pedagogical conversations between Rivka Eckert, Joe Lockard, and Julie Rada, this book project began with Lizbett Benge, a quantifiably bad-ass collaborator and comrade. Lizbett brought an expert-level intersectional feminist approach throughout the formal book process by co-drafting the call for contributors, reading and discussing abstracts, providing editorial feedback, having conversations with many contributors, and having numerous conversations with me about decolonizing our thought at "scholarly" approaches, the publishing practices. As such, when I say *we*, I include her, alongside the authors. As Lizbett and I worked together, we were fueled by questions more than answers. We asked a *lot* of questions of one another, and questions of ourselves: *Does this book align with our values? Are we the right people to work on it? Can writing this hold the contradictions and challenges of abolitionist theatre-work? Do we even want to fix this work to a page?*

Questions don't always lead to answers; more often than not, they lead to better questions. While we worked together these questions fueled our abolitionist feminist aims and were guided by Indigenous teachers, scholars, and artists who valued the import of having and knowing your values and returned to ask about every decision and those who came before us. In doing such, we stand on the shoulders

of those who've worked in performance spaces and movement organizing around abolition.

## What Led Us to This Point?

No one is born an abolitionist. Something, or someone, offers insight to expose enough light where the path becomes clear. We rely on the following sources[2] as significant inspirations:

> The work of Critical Resistance, Angela Davis, Aurora Levins Morales, Ricardo Levins Morales, Dean Spade, Keeanga-Yamata Taylor, Erica Meiners, Andrea Ritchie, Beth Ritchie, Virginia Grise, Martha Gonzales, INCITE! Women of color against violence, Maya Schenwar, Cathy Cohen, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Lisa Guenther, Malcolm X, Tourmaline, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Dylan Rodríguez, Vik Peer, Jina Kim, Marisa Duarte, Mariame Kaba, Patrisse Cullors, adrienne maree brown, audre lorde, Yellowhead Institute, Bettina Love, Sojourner Truth, Liat Ben-Moshe, Sarah Lamble, Sins Invalid, the Creative Interventions Project, Bay Area Transformative Justice Project, Mia Mingus, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

Once in community, supporting peers, colleagues, accomplices, and allies, the dedication to abolition becomes impossible to shirk. Abolition is not only about what we dismantle, but also about what we create. Within Ruthie Wilson Gilmore's rejoinder that abolitionists are builders, Benge calls us to "stay dedicated to learning, to living, and to curiosity. We stay in the practice of making things artful."[3] We stay in Toni Cade Bambara's call to make the revolution irresistible. We arrived here by caring about people and working to expand that circle of care to hold just one more person, maybe two. We arrived here by transmuting fear, shame, and hurt. We arrived here by connecting to nature, finding the murmuration of movement and cycles of change. We stay open.

> "What is left is full of possibility, pleasure, complexity, beauty, ease, heart, and alignment. This together with formal study, experimentation, and experiential political education offer complex, nuanced, explicit understanding of the interconnectedness of all phenomena and beyond mere suspicion of police-based entities to an opposition to and actively countering of policing, prisons, surveillance, and systems of rupture, harm, and capture."[4]

## Abolitionist Roots and Genealogies

The contemporary abolitionist movement contains a wide range of strategical approaches. While the techniques to get there may differ, "one overarching aim of much abolitionist organizing is to end current systems, structures, and practices of imprisonment, policing, and punishment. We need diverse peoples in diverse

movements doing diverse work."[5] We need those in abolitionist practice to be willing to *stay* in the difference in order move forward together.

We locate ourselves and this book in the context of contemporary US America, prison industrial complex anti-enslavement abolition, theatre for social change (TfSC), and community-based theatre practices. The origin of abolition in the United States can be traced back to the early days of the nation's history. Within a political genealogy, the abolitionist movement began, while Portuguese, Spanish, and English peoples trapped, captured, tortured, and enslaved peoples of the African continent trafficking the Africans throughout the Atlantic and Americas. As people were enslaved and brought to what came to be called the United States of America, slavery became deeply entrenched in the ideologic, economic, and social structures of American society, primarily in the Southern states. Over time, a growing number of individuals and groups began to question the morality and legality of slavery – abolitionists.

Abolition of the institution of slavery gained momentum during the 18th and 19th centuries, fueled by a combination of religious, moral, and political arguments. Influential figures like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and later, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and William Lloyd Garrison, among others, played key roles in advocating for the abolition of slavery. The abolitionist movement gained widespread support through the publication of powerful anti-slavery literature, the establishment of abolitionist societies, and the organization of various political campaigns. The movement faced significant opposition from pro-slavery advocates, leading to heated debates and eventually sparking the American Civil War.

Ultimately, the long and arduous struggle of abolitionists, combined with the horrors of the Civil War, resulted in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the eventual passage of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865, which, while *formally* abolishing slavery in the United States, allows for slavery for the "convicted."[6] This exception has contributed to the perpetuation of forced labor within the prison system and created a "New Jim Crow" "slavery" under a new name: the prison industrial complex.[7]

The legacies of white supremacy are present in every aspect of our culture and can be traced through the slave trade and racialized capitalism. The social justice movements for prison abolition, articulated by scholar/activists like Michelle Alexander, Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and others, find the parallels between the current criminal court system, historical laws, and structures of police enforcement which enforce racial segregation and discrimination. Scholarly critiques, like those of James Forman Jr, of the connections between slavery and prison labor namely state that the analogy between slavery and the prison system oversimplify the complexities surrounding mass incarceration, lack an intersectional approach in addressing race, gender, and class, and diminish the collective harm of slavery and Jim Crow laws. At the risk of oversimplification, the movements between slavery abolition and those in prison and police abolition share a historical continuity (as

referenced by the 13th Amendment) in their connections to structural racism and race-making state violence practices. Adding to that throughline, current calls for abolition demand moving state funding away from all punitive approaches that incarcerate people with disabilities and mental health issues, or people living in poverty.

## Prison and Police Abolition

Prison and police abolition seeks to dismantle the prison system and challenge the legitimacy of law enforcement institutions. It is based on the belief that prisons and punitive policing produce violence, racial stratification, and waste, without effectively addressing the harms they are supposed to address. The purported purposes of US police and aligned agents of the State are to protect life and property through maintaining law and order.[8] That could mean keeping citizens safe, protecting property, responding to emergencies, conducting investigations, monitoring behavior, and conducting interviews. While those are the stated goals of police and law enforcement, in practice, the legacy of white supremacy is present in the over-policing and increased surveillance of Black and brown communities. Since statistics began to be gathered around police violence,[9] the number of people killed by police has climbed exponentially each year, with Black Americans killed at a disproportionate rate to white Americans. Police killed at least three people per day in 2022,[10] which begs the question, *who* do the police keep safe?

"Contemporary definitions of police and prison abolition incorporate all carceral technologies[11] of law enforcement and policing at local, national, and global levels, including the military, border control, family regulation systems, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and those who represent the civil authority of a government – thus becoming agents of the State. These systems perpetuate inequality, racial injustice, and fail to create safety – the conditions that foster survival grounded in the 'freedom to cultivate your own existence.'"[12, 13] By proposing alternative approaches focused on community investment, restorative justice, and transformative practices, abolition, defined by Mariame Kaba, is a "long-term project around creating the conditions that would allow for the dismantling of prisons, policing, and surveillance and the creation of new institutions that actually work to keep us safe." As Maya Schenwar writes, "we don't need 'alternatives to incarceration,' we need a wildly recreated society [which]… will nourish and fuel struggles for transformation." Put another way by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "abolition is about presence not absence. It's about building life affirming institutions."

By divesting from the carceral state – prisons and police departments – and reallocating resources toward education, healthcare, social services, and conflict resolution, abolitionist practice addresses systemic issues and creates the capacity for communities centered on eudaemonia, care, and equity. Many contributors within this book address theatre's place in police and prison abolition movement building specifically around rewriting narratives around carceral logics, restorative

justice practices, and tracing the extended reach of the prison industrial complex into educational systems.

## Abolition in Schools

The abolition movement within an educational context aims to address and eliminate discriminatory practices to create equitable and inclusive learning environments for *all* students. While some progress toward civil rights milestones in equitable education have been made, disproportionate discipline toward Black and brown students, achievement gaps, unequal funding between schools in affluent and low-income districts work to perpetuate racial, economic, and social inequalities. Scholar/activist Bettina Love calls this experience an "educational survival complex, in which students are left learning to merely survive" in schools that mimic and reproduce the same inherently inequitable and oppressive structures of the larger society.[14] Black students, boys and girls alike, from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade are overrepresented in every form of discipline – from teacher-issued referrals to corporal punishment to suspensions, expulsions, and police arrests.[15] Many educational scholars associate the social control through punitive actions in educational spaces with the long reach of the carceral state, calling it the school-to-prison pipeline (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Wald and Losen 2003). The struggle toward educational equity goes on as we live in a moment where the freedom to teach with equity and justice frameworks is under threat.

Currently, a wave of anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) and "anti-woke" legislation meant to outlaw teaching about race and racism is sweeping the country's classrooms and educational institutions. As of April 2023, there are currently 18 states that have banned the teaching of CRT, while another nine states are in the process of banning it.[16] Although CRT is predominately taught in law schools and is highly specific, the laws associated with it have a broad and wide reach through the educational system, including P-12. The vagueness of these laws appears by design to specifically stoke fear in teachers and cause self-censorship around teaching any topic that might make students feel uncomfortable. These laws have been blocked on college campuses in Florida,[17] as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Legal Defense Fund (LDF) argue against their constitutionality.

In addition to the advocacy and organizing support offered by the ACLU and LDF, there are numerous abolitionist movements seeking to dismantle oppressive and inequitable structures within the education system and to build up culturally responsive and community-engaged educational spaces within a praxis of equity and love. Defined by Zaino (2021), abolitionism in educational settings creates "a vision for education that imagines its possibilities beyond its racist instantiations – and a daily practice of working in solidarity with communities of color."[18] Advocates for abolition in schools aim to challenge punitive disciplinary practices, such as zero-tolerance policies, that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Advocates for abolitionist pedagogies and practices in schools campaign

for "untethering education from the carceral state grounded in punishment and confinement,"[19] and eliminating policies that disproportionately target and punish students of color, students with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. Instead, they propose the implementation of restorative justice practices, rewriting and re-imagining curriculums with embedded strategies of resistance to address issues impacting all students and their communities.

These movements include interventions in teacher training, community-led efforts to address resource disparities, advocating for equitable funding, and providing necessary support systems for students, like restorative justice practices. Moreover, the abolitionist movement in schools calls for a comprehensive overhaul of curriculum content and methodological approach to include diverse perspectives and histories, in part by promoting inclusive and accurate portrayals of cultures and communities. Scholar activists like bell hooks, Bettina Love, and Gholdy E. Muhammad[20] have provided frameworks to create nurturing and inclusive learning environments that prioritize well-being, belonging, and success of all students and their families in fighting for the removal of structural and institutional barriers recognizing that "no type of pedagogy, however effective, can single-handedly remove the barriers of racism, discrimination, homophobia, segregation, homelessness, access to college, and concentrated poverty."[21] Ultimately, the goal of abolition in the US schools is for the flourishing of all students regardless of their background or identity.

## Abolitionist Theatre as World-Making

No matter the beginning headwaters, all tributaries of abolitionist practice require active participation. The *doing* of abolition, as scholar Dylan Rodríguez describes, generates a "kind of creative truth that mixes the stuff of history into memory, survival, breath, and stubborn, vexed, and often-nourishing community that constantly escapes the guarantees of any organizing plan" (1610). "The reflexive practices of abolition and theatre-making involve observation, information gathering, relationships, revision, refinement, creation, loss, forms of evaluation and generation, development, and a dedicated commitment toward curiosity and questioning."[22] Theatre-makers, as Augusto Boal is frequently quoted, "rehearse for the revolution," therefore we create theatre to live in the worlds we imagine. Abolition is about imagining new worlds. Theatre is about manifesting imaginary worlds. Abolitionist theatre rehearses building imagined worlds with real-world impact.

Abolitionist theatre, an emergent term used by the contributors to this book, aims to provoke critical thinking, propel practices of relationality,[23] and inspire action. By creating future visions and offering narratives counter to those based on racist capitalist ontologies, abolitionist theatre makes visible the experiences of those affected by systemic oppression, encourages audiences to reflect on their own roles and responsibilities within these structures, and creates the conditions for change.

## White American Theatre and Abolitionist Theatre

Theatre-making demands the capacity for freedom-dreaming; yet, theatre-making in the United States is built on a scarcity model, forever generating profits at the expense of the "starving artist" who has been trained to be grateful for experience. The most popular models for theatre-making in the United States, not-for-profit and commercial, often exist within systems which base value on any production's ability to turn profit. For theatre to exist within a capitalist system, it cannot help but perpetuate through labor conditions, exploitation, and even content, the white supremacist and hetero-patriarchical values.

Building on a long history of BIPOC theatre-makers' critique of the exclusivity, racism, and sexism in theatre in the United States, the list of demands released in 2020 by We See You, White American Theatre (WSYWAT) has since gained over 100,000 signatures. This 29-page document outlines a framework for reworking every facet of theatre-making, from training, press, marketing, production, to development. In the three years since the document's release, WSYWAT has distributed progress reports and held prominent theatres accountable to the vision of equitable and inclusive theatre. Many of these demands, especially those around pay equity, transparency, and increased access, work toward abolitionist theatre's aims.

Similar to the intentions of WSYWAT, this collection means to disrupt and call to account, while at the same time building coalition and accountability. Abolitionist theatre is complicated work, but we can hold the contradictions and tensions in service of building a flourishing, thriving, and prosperous practice together. The practices described in these chapters model how abolitionist theatre rejects and unsettles the logics of carceral systems and creates the conditions for liberation, broadly defined. The range of projects show methods of creating abolitionist theatre and community, mindfully and intentionally center the voices of those impacted by state-sanctioned violence, addressing harm, celebrating joy, and generating meaningful action.

Contained within this book are call-ins and strategies to address the failures of the theatre industry and higher education. Contributors address issues like the exploitative nature of the Broadway Industrial Complex, the mythic norm of whiteness, and offer some successes in the form of case studies around the ethics of storytelling for marginalized groups, harm-reduction practices in ensemble, and the limits of TfSC and theatre for the oppressed. In short, theatre, especially theatre within higher education, can do better and this book provides tangible examples around how that can happen.

## Discussion of Sections

Perhaps you are coming to this book as an abolitionist and interested in ways of aligning your theatre-making with those values. Maybe you are a theatre-maker who is curious about abolition. Whoever you are, you will find in this book practical and accessible theatre-making tools for healing, creating, relating, and cultivating

spaces of understanding, collaboration, empathy, and justice with the goal of abolition. After each section, you will find an interlude with reflective and practical questions. These questions are meant to help you pause, rest, and reflect on how to incorporate the ideas and methods presented in the section.

Borrowing from the categorical work of Project Nia, Interrupting Criminalization and Critical Resistance, I've placed the chapters within sections where there is actionable alignment within the approach or type of abolitionist theatre-making approach, and the guiding question frameworks are useful for distilling similarities and learnings. This overview of the book's sections provides details of what you will find in each chapter, but look to the interludes and reflections before and after each section for deeper engagement.

### *Section I: Prison Industrial Complex/Capitalism*

According to abolitionist organization Critical Resistance, "the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems."[24] By acknowledging the existence of the PIC, we unveil the extensive network of individuals and organizations with vested interests in mass incarceration. Furthermore, the PIC encompasses privately owned immigration detention centers that house undocumented immigrants, often subjecting them to abuse and neglect. As of September 2021, 79% of people detained each day in ICE custody are detained in facilities owned or operated by private prison corporations.[25] These centers prioritize financial gains by cutting costs on essential services like medical care, food, and maintenance.

Contrary to mainstream narratives, the increase in incarceration rates in the United States cannot be attributed to a rise in crime. The ACLU highlights that while the incarcerated population has surged by 700% since 1970, crime rates have been consistently declining since the mid-1990s. This stark disparity between decreasing crime rates and soaring incarceration rates challenges the notion that increased crime drives the prison population. According to the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, incarceration is not only "an expensive way to achieve less public safety," but it may actually increase crime by breaking down the social and family bonds that guide individuals away from crime, removing adults who would otherwise nurture children, depriving communities of income, reducing future income potential, and engendering a deep resentment toward the legal system.[26] Scholars and activists, including Angela Davis, argue that the construction of prisons and the push to fill them are motivated by ideologies of racism and profit rather than a response to crime levels.

Within this section, chapters from Rada, Eckert, Saribal, and Ranjan explore different aspects of theatre's role in challenging the interconnected interests that fuel the prison industrial complex, specifically within the context of prisons, higher education, and the experiences of undocumented immigrants.

Julie Rada's chapter "Holding Ourselves Accountable and Holding Out for the Horizon: Facilitating the Arts in Prisons" applies a critique of prison arts programming that perpetuates the hierarchical nature of saviorism, exploring practices to safeguard practitioners from unintentionally causing harm to incarcerated artists. Rada offers deft articulation about the often questionable aims of prison arts practitioners within carceral spaces, along with reflective prompts for practitioners.

Rivka Eckert's chapter uses her theatre work with retired Correctional Officers as an indictment of the devastation the prison industrial complex bears on all who pass through the gates. By sharing the interview-based theatre-making processes of *North Country Bound*, this chapter engages theatre's ability to bridge communities across layers of access, representation, and experience.

Misty Saribal traces how theatre, as both process and event, can support campus movements aimed at abolishing higher education's role(s) in expanding racial capitalism, policing, and prisons, including on-campus prison labor. The chapter highlights the importance for academic abolitionists to challenge higher education institutions' production(s) of racial capitalism and carcerality.

Devika Ranjan's chapter "Amplifying Undocumented Stories: On Resisting the "Crimmigration' Regime at Albany Park Theater Project" describes Albany Park Theater Project's (APTP) dual abolitionist practices: countering the invisibilization of undocumented people by telling their stories without putting them at risk, and strengthening communities through empathetic performance. APTP works against the biopolitical subjugation and civil death of undocumented immigrants by centering marginalized narratives onstage, interrogating harmful structures of violence through performance, and celebrating acts of resistance in front of national and international audiences.

Overall, these chapter descriptions collectively explore the transformative potential of theatre as a means to challenge oppressive systems, amplify marginalized voices, bridge communities, and hold practitioners accountable to avoid causing harm. They address issues within the prison industrial complex, higher education, and the experiences of undocumented immigrants while offering critical reflections and practices for balancing the tensions of challenging institutions while operating within their frameworks.

### *Section II: No Reforms*

Reformism is a political ideology or approach that advocates for making gradual changes and improvements within existing systems or institutions rather than seeking to completely replace or overthrow them. The "no reform" concept within abolitionist practice reflects a commitment to dismantle incarceration in all its forms, resisting common reforms that create or expand cages anywhere, including under the guise of "addressing needs" or as "updated" replacements. While many abolitionists agree that liberation can only be achieved by eradicating the root cause of oppression rather than mitigating effects through incremental reform, many

abolitionists are also working to better carceral conditions through reformist approaches. These approaches, like creating higher education programs within prisons, advocating for the end of solitary confinement practices, or working to “Ban the Box” in college admissions processes, can be held with a capacious synergy with non-reform abolitionist strategies.

The chapters within this section are grouped together to highlight and explore different aspects of non-reformist approaches within the realm of theatre and social change. Julie Rada and Maya Osterman-Van Grack’s chapter contrasts two projects that took place in the same youth facility, with many of the same staff and partnership agreements. Through the different outcomes of these projects, Rada and Osterman-Van Grack share the nascent stages of a shift into radical and abolitionist approaches to leadership, operations, fundraising, and programming in a nonprofit organization. Their chapter links to a central tenet within this section, the ethical considerations between theatre-making which strengthens carceral practices and logic and abolitionist steps that reduce its overall impact and grow other possibilities for well-being.

Chapters 8 and 9 illuminate the liberatory potential of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) practices, and the need for abolitionist practices within secondary education systems and teacher training programs. Rachael Rhoades and Lori Pitts describe the findings after conducting two focus groups with their artist collaborators and participants to inform the examination of the liberatory potential of TO. In this call to action, the authors argue for applying TO practices as an effective tactic in the process of transforming carceral institutions.

By looking at the many ethical challenges involved in TfSC well-intentioned yet precarious practices, Aubrey Helene Neumann’s chapter continues this section’s critique of power structures and offers experimentations toward liberation. Drawing on contemporary TfSC and educational change theory, as well as her experience as a teaching artist facilitating both in-school and extracurricular TfSC residencies, this chapter explores how to advocate for more liberatory practices within secondary education systems.

Collectively, these chapters critique the ability for TfSC, TO, and nonprofit organizations to engage with non-reformist approaches against carceral and educational power structures. By naming those challenges and the authors’ well-intentioned yet precarious practices within TfSC and carceral institutions, they call for a shift toward more equitable and liberatory approaches that prioritize partnerships and collaborations in achieving transformative goals.

### *Section III: Build Community*

While all the writing in this book in some way addresses building community, the chapters within this section speak specifically to the ways that culture passes through community-building processes. As theatre-makers, we understand the power theatre has in bringing communities together, sparking dialogue, and creating

a shared experience that strengthens connections and builds a sense of belonging. These chapters dig deep with lessons around collaborative co-creation, inclusive storytelling practices, and theatre-making models that create responsive and thriving communities.

Mariana Green and Alyssa Ramos' chapter details the challenging process of cowriting, alongside a handful of other self-identified femmes of color, *Epic Tales from the Land of Melanin,* a participatory Theatre for Young Audiences play rooted in abolitionist ethos. By detailing the challenges and successes from the creative leadership team throughout the lifespan of the project, Green and Ramos examine narrative examples of moments where their behavior harmfully diverged from their justice values.

Katherine Nigh's conversation with Robert Villanueva, and Brandon de Santiago addresses how the performance-making process affected the students involved; including selected excerpts of the script; how the production impacted the larger Pasadena City College community; and, lastly, how working with formerly incarcerated students impacted Nigh's directing.

Elizabeth Hawes' chapter acts as a guide to document and raise up the story of creating theatre/performance while incarcerated, recognizing value in all people, and encouraging empathetic change. The chapter offers both the process of writing the play *Supernova*, and impact on the audience.

Through a discussion of the development of Civic Ensemble's ReEntry Theatre Program's 2018 production, *Streets Like This*, Sarah Chalmers' chapter focuses on writing, editing, and performance processes and draws on first-person interviews with participants and facilitators. By including practical steps for making theatre in community and the challenges of finding solidarity between participants and practitioners, the chapter unpacks conflicts inherent in pursuing a liberatory theatre practice that take us beyond the easy binary of right and wrong and into the messy work of building solidarity across difference.

### *Section IV: Interconnection/Future Dreaming*

Interconnection and future dreaming are practices within the abolitionist imagination. By cultivating a collective space and time for dreaming and pulling back visions and ways of being from the imagined future into the present, abolitionist theatre-makers find the interconnections of the many paths forward. The chapters in this section share common themes of memory work, storytelling, personal healing, and the transformative potential of the arts in relation to abolitionist and social justice frameworks.

In their chapter, Tyrell Blacquemoss invites the reader as a participant/co-creator into a ceremony with characters from *Kitchen Table Gam* to access the ancestral memory stored in our collective DNA. Combining gospel choirs, Black Indigenous ancestry, and critical theory, this chapter offers a practice in freedom through memory work and the chance to see resources within atrocity while imagining an abolitionist future.

Drama therapist Lynn Baker-Nauman and writer/actor Spoon Jackson explore personal storytelling and collaborative writing as having the potential to connect to the capacity to heal. Jackson's multi-genre writings serve as an analytical guide for how theatre cultivates personal awareness.

Dr. Fesette's interview with playwright Erika Dickerson-Despenza covers a range of topics that illuminate the horizon of abolitionist theatre-making, including Black radical feminist performance, the 2020 uprisings, care, and relationality. As an artist invested in radical political visions, Dickerson-Despenza's abolitionist creative practice generates key insights into both the histories and the liberatory potential of Black, queer, feminist theatre-making.

Informed by the cultural and institutional lives of incarcerated queer and trans people of color, Joey Martinez' autoethnographic chapter follows learnings and challenges from a 2020 client-run workshop that was twice performed within the Men's County Jail in Los Angeles. By recovering stories of "transformation" from in(ti) mate community members, the third chapter in this section addresses abolitionist space/time as a means for the fashioning of queer gestures toward imagined amends.

## Where Does That Leave Us?

This book started as the desire to document conversations between theatre-artists, practitioners, and activists. I craved the opportunity to hold my theatre-making practices against others and develop a deeper lexicon for coalition and reflection. As we critiqued our own theatre-making practices through the lens of abolition, we set out researching as much as we could about the connections between other freedom and liberation struggles.[27] There is more to say and certainly more to learn.

The effort of this work has taught me many things. Markedly, we've learned that this work moves in counter-pace to the often urgent pace of performance-making and grind of capitalism. This practice demands the dedication of more time toward rooting out the specific questions we want to work toward rather than articulating singular answers. The practice means letting go of or getting the wording perfectly right. (I laugh as I edit this one more time.) The practice isn't completing a checklist of abolitionist activism and considering it done. Abolitionist theatre-making takes all of us experimenting toward possibility together. This work is slow. The trust-building can be slow. When repair is necessary, the healing can be slow. The lessons can be slow to integrate and process. Slow can be beautiful. We wish you slow purposeful work toward your abolitionist horizon.

## Notes

1 In *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, Ross writes about identity politics, intersectionality, and reproductive justice movement work, suggesting "it takes all of our difference to make our movement whole; differences become barriers that break us into fragments only if we let them" (78).

2 Lizbett Benge compiled the original list of these sources. The list has grown to reflect how contributors reflect on their own abolitionist lineages.

3 Benge, Lizbett (2022). "Abolitionist Artistic Insurgencies," [unpublished work].

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
6 The specific wording of the 13th Amendment states: "Neither slavery not involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist in the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."
7 See Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) for a deep exploration of the connections between the 13th Amendment and the racial discrimination through the US legal, court, and police systems.
8 Bureau of Justice Statistics: Law Enforcement. https://bjs.ojp.gov/topics/law-enforcement
9 Since 2015, the Washington Post has been logging every person shot and killed by an on-duty police officer, and has made that data publicly available. Given that individual police departments are not required to report incidents to the federal government, the FBI data prior to 2015 suggests significant under-reported. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/
10 The 2022 data from the *Washington Post* show 1,096 people shot and killed by on-duty police officers.
11 Carceral technologies lean on what Dylan Rodriguez refers to as "incarcerating technologies."
12 Ibid.
13 This definition of safety was seen on a poster at a 2021 Night Out for Safety and Liberation event (https://nosl.us/).
14 Love, Bettina. (2019) *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom.* Boston, Beacon Press. p. 27.
15 Owens, J., & McLanahan, S. S. (2020) "Unpacking the Drivers of Racial Disparities in School Suspension and Expulsion." *Social Forces: A Scientific Medium of Social Study and Interpretation*, 98:4, 1548–1577. DOI: 10.1093/sf/soz095
16 World Population Review. https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/critical-race-theory-ban-states
17 https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/floridas-stop-woke-law-remain-blocked-colleges-appeals-court-rules-rcna75455
18 Zaino, K. (2021) "Teaching in the Service of Fugitive Learning." *#CritEdPol: Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies at Swarthmore College*, 3:1, 64–80. Page 71. DOI: 10.24968/2473-912X.3.1.5
19 Coles, Justin A., Esther O. Ohito, Keisha L. Green, & Jamila Lyiscott. (2021) "Fugitivity and Abolition in Educational Research and Practice: An Offering," *Equity & Excellence in Education,* 54:2, 103–111. DOI: 10.1080/10665684.2021.1972595
20 Suggested reading Bettina Love's (2019) *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* and Muhammad's notion of Agitation Literacies, represented in Bettina L. Love & Gholnecsar E. Muhammad (2020) "What Do We Have to Lose: Toward Disruption, Agitation, and Abolition in Black Education, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33:7, 695–697, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2020.1753257
21 Love, Bettina *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, p. 19.
22 Ibid.
23 While the language around communities of care and relational support exists in many community-building frameworks, I borrow the phrase "practices of relationality" from Nicole Fleetwood and her work on carceral aesthetics (*Marking Time*, 26).
24 Prison Industrial Complex definition from http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/
25 American Civil Liberties Union, https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/more-of-the-same-private-prison-corporations-and-immigration-detention-under-the-biden-administration
26 https://eji.org/news/study-finds-increased-incarceration-does-not-reduce-crime/
27 The list of potential connections between freedom and liberation struggles and abolitionist theatre-making practices came from the original call for contributors, co-written with Lizbett Benge, stated the following: "Abolitionist theatre-making is theatre that deeply interweaves

and is interconnected to decolonization, tribal sovereignty, intersectional feminism, transnational feminism, climate justice, racial justice, reproductive justice, disability justice, anticapitalism, anti-imperialism, reparations, labor movements, the art, activism, and cultural production of peoples of the global majority, and all freedom & liberation struggles."

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# SECTION I

# Prison Industrial Complex/ Capitalism

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# 1

# INTERLUDE 1

While each chapter within this section focuses on a distinct site and community, there are some connections that can be made between the harms of carcerality and capitalism:

**A critique of prison arts programming**: Both Julie Rada's chapter and Eckert's chapter touch on the problematic aspects and gaps of arts programming in carceral spaces. Rada highlights the hierarchical nature of saviorism perpetuated by some prison arts practitioners and provides a reflexive praxis for inventorying benefits. Using arts-based inquiry, Eckert's chapter offers an indictment of the prison industrial complex and its effects on all individuals involved, including retired Correctional Officers.

**Bridging communities and challenging financial structures**: Eckert's chapter and Misty Saribal's chapter emphasize theatre's potential to bridge communities and challenge oppressive financial structures. Eckert uses interview-based theatre-making processes to bridge gaps in access, representation, and experience, while Saribal focuses on theatre's role in supporting campus movements aimed at abolishing racial capitalism, policing, and prisons within higher education. Both chapters address capitalism as a guiding force in the economies of rural geographies and higher education.

**Amplifying marginalized narratives**: Devika Ranjan's chapter and Misty Saribal's chapter emphasize the importance of centering marginalized narratives in theatre. Ranjan's chapter specifically focuses on Albany Park Theater Project's practices of amplifying undocumented stories, countering invisibilization, and celebrating acts of resistance. Saribal's chapter highlights the need for academic abolitionists to challenge higher education institutions' productions of racial capitalism and carcerality.

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# 2

# HOLDING OURSELVES ACCOUNTABLE AND HOLDING OUT FOR THE HORIZON

## Facilitating the Arts in Prisons

*Julie Rada*

In the United States, two prevailing stories of justice have taken hold of the cultural imagination and the philosophy of corrections, often positioned in opposition to one another and constituting the entire field of possibilities: control and rehabilitation (Craig 93). The control narrative is regressive and reactionary, rooted in a retributive approach to addressing harm, distorting notions of public safety, and resulting in inhumane policies and a politics of abandonment, both inside prison facilities and in the public discourse. Artists with an interest in intervening on the prison-industrial complex (PIC) are ensnared between these dominant narratives and, in the dearth of other possibilities, are often seduced by the rehabilitation paradigm.[1]

Rehabilitation appears politically broadminded, sympathetic to incarcerated people, and *possible*. Rehabilitation offers a "progressive, linear storyline where everything seems to work out in the end" (McAvinchey 18). What is missing is abolition, a third story of justice that incorporates alternatives to healing and community repair, including restorative and transformative justice, and envisions a world in which prisons have no function in resolving harm or otherwise. Abolition is radical, nonlinear, and by most, virtually ignored. Often dismissed as impossible or marginalized in the dominant discourse as too extreme, abolition resides just out of reach in the far-off future, barely legible on the horizon.

While the retributive approach views an incarcerated individual as disposable, rehabilitation produces almost too much attention, in which the surveillance of the state is focused not solely on the confinement of an individual's body, but on the transformation of their heart and mind. Viewed in this way, rehabilitation appears to be a colonial project, an offshoot of white savior complex, in which incarcerated people are seen as empty vessels or, in the words of Charles Taylor, *mis*recognized as not fully human or fully developed, by the non-incarcerated (25). The

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narrative of rehabilitation forms the impetus behind many prison-based theatre and arts programs in which artists appear motivated to "make a difference" in the lives of incarcerated people, often through the fraught concept of catalyzing individual transformation in the incarcerated other, while inadvertently making the prison better and, potentially, enabling it to endure.[2] In essence, rehabilitation is contra-abolition and art projects can be co-opted to conceal the need for the transformation of *systems*, not individuals.

"If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement," Teju Cole wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2012, a year before I walked onto a prison yard as an arts practitioner.[3] Cole describes how the "The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege." This chapter examines the intersection of the white savior industrial complex with the PIC, specifically at the axis of prison arts. I propose disrupting the white savior industrial complex in prison arts programming by tackling the work of practicing and facilitating the arts behind bars with "a little due diligence," decentering the big emotional experience of the practitioner and weakening the PIC by practicing and promoting a politics of recognition. Here, I examine the language of rehabilitation and, by extension, white saviorism. In response, I suggest reflexive practices of identifying privilege and inventorying benefits for practitioners to engage their due diligence in approaching theatre-making behind bars.

> Due diligence opens pathways for artists working inside to practice abolition.
>
> An abolitionist politic … necessarily moves us away from attempting to 'fix' the PIC and helps us imagine an entirely different world—one that is not built upon the historical and contemporary legacies of the racial and gendered brutality that maintain the power of the PIC … [that] radically restages our conversations and our ways of living and understanding as to undo our reliance on the PIC and its cultural logics.
>
> *Stanley and Smith 14*

An abolitionist politic informs an approach to working inside that might best be apprehended as an embodied politics of recognition, naming what is, and making more possible what can take place behind prison walls (Taylor 25; brown 17–18). An abolitionist approach to prison-based arts orients toward ruptures in the prison narrative, toward a horizon of abolition, through taking "a brick out of the wall, one by one" (Kaba 93; Olatushani qtd. in Fleetwood). To move in the direction of this approach, the artist must attempt to work outside the capitalist grind of production in order to practice critical reflection on the arts practice itself. Perhaps abolitionist prison theatre practitioners are positioned to disrupt the rehabilitation narrative, promoting a more expansive view of justice rooted in deep, community-wide healing and accountability, even when, or especially when, the narrative is untidy and nonlinear. This chapter is not intended as an indictment of my colleagues in

the field of prison-based theatre, but instead offers strategies by which we can be accountable to our ethics, gain clarity in our intentions, and possibly "restage our conversations" to include abolition in our work.[4] Moreover, *I* wish to hold myself accountable to my abolitionist values and gain greater clarity of the practice of prison-based theatre and my motivations, responsibilities, and role within the field. This feels critically important as I identify as an abolitionist, but also as white, educated, femme-identified person.

## Prison Arts and Practitioner Positionality—Uneasily Situated

In some cases, prison-based practitioners are covert abolitionists. Prison administrators are literal gatekeepers, managing who is permitted or denied access to prison grounds. Practitioners who espouse an abolitionist politics publicly, within the surveillance gaze of the state, can be barred without cause from entering prison grounds without justification. As Rachel Nelson remarked at the 2021 Justice Arts Convening, "the minute you say abolition, nobody wants to let you in prisons" (Nelson qtd. in Fleetwood). It is difficult to speak to what a practitioner or an organization's private goals are compared to their public-facing image. I know from my experience that prison-based artists must engage in code switching to gain access, funds, and credibility. The conversation itself indicates a larger question about the limits of abolitionist work inside and the capacity of an artist to articulate their politics publicly.

Abolition efforts are not always fundable within a nonprofit industrial complex that increasingly demands quantitative evidence of the efficacy of the work in a kind of "if this then that" formula. Like most grant-funded work, program evaluation in prison programs is thus steered in the direction of effecting change on incarcerated people as atomized individuals in ways that are observable and measurable, replicating capitalist logic and practice. Abolition is a long-term collective project, resistant to program outcomes and existing on a far-off horizon. Foundations and funders, the financial life blood of nonprofits, are not likely to fund work that is antagonistic to the state or widespread in its critical scope, as abolition is. Thus, prison arts practitioners often navigate optics and balance their private feelings with what is publicly shared about what happens inside prisons when they are present.

A further factor that may explain the more reformist aims of prison arts practice is that many prison arts practitioners lack exposure to a critical analysis of the PIC prior to stepping onto a prison yard and enter the work through their art practice or as educators. Again, there are two agreed-upon narratives of justice—control (retribution) and rehabilitation—with limited exposure in conventional educational spaces to the third as-of-yet unwritten abolitionist story.[5] Simply put, many people lack an informed understanding of prison unless one has direct proximity to prison, which is conditioned by race, geography, and socioeconomics. The role and history of prisons in society and an interrogation of carceral logics are rarely taught in the dominant discourse of either the arts or education fields and are outside the disciplinary scope. Practitioners interested in increasing their

literacy about prisons must proactively seek out information sources that counter the imagery of prisons that dominate popular culture and the public imagination.

From my research, there are no discipline-wide studies on the demographics of prison arts practitioners. Anecdotally, as a studied practitioner in the field, I have observed that prison-based artists skew white and female-identified. Trends in education might be a useful parallel and, in a study of teaching artists, Snyder and Fisk report, "The majority of teaching artists (68%) were female, white (77%), had a Bachelor's degree or higher (88%), spent most of their time teaching children or adolescents (60%) and held their highest academic degree in an art form (68%)" (6).[6] Between what I have observed from practitioners writing, presenting, and leading organizations in the prison arts field and Snyder and Fisk's findings, gaps in the research aside, I feel I can claim that prison arts practitioners are often white, female-identified, and highly educated at mainstream academic institutions.[7] Additionally, access to prisons is limited, and practitioners are individual volunteers, associated with nonprofit (again, beholden to the state), or affiliated with institutions of higher education.[8] All of these are markers of white, upper-middle-class status and abundant material resources. Liberal volunteerism fills the vacuum left by conservative austerity measures that cut and underfund critical human services and social safety nets as a manifestation of a politics of abandonment (Flaherty 25). By contrast, prisons are male-dominated, and people of color are overrepresented. We can extrapolate that many people who volunteer to work in prison art programs share little lived experiences with the people inside prison.[9] A lack of critical consciousness of prisons and their logics on the part of the practitioner can widen the gap in understanding between practitioner and participant, furthering notions not based in the daily realities of an incarcerated person's life, but rather oversimplified "helping" narratives.

Most people in this society have a "shrunken imagination" (Duda qtd. in Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* 94) about prison abolition, taking prisons for granted as enduring systems to manage public safety and correct, if not punish, antisocial behavior. In a capitalist society, we tend to take an atomized approach to identifying the origins of harm, locating the cause of harm solely in the individual. As Davis famously notes:

> Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.
>
> *Davis, "Masked Racism"*

Culturally, we are taught to view people who are incarcerated through a deficit lens that ignores how the prison system culminates centuries of racialized politics to further entrench inequality and white supremacy in the U.S. culture. In a capitalist, Judeo-Christian, individualist society operating under a myth of meritocracy,

the dominant understanding of prison is predicated on the idea that a person's inborn disposition motivates behavior, obscuring the reality of situational or systemic forces acting on a person's choices. Often, the concept of "disposition" is regarded in a binary of "good guys" versus "bad guys," as though these are fixed identities. If there is something inherent about the person, we conclude that sin is located in the sinner, illness in the patient, failure in the student, and crime in the criminal (Zimbardo 7–8). This inability to recognize situational and systemic forces has disastrous implications.

The tendency to over-rely on a dispositional analysis is more insidious as we examine who is in prison. Mariame Kaba excoriates the system:

> Prisons are an iteration of structural racism in the United States, which allows some people to be treated as less than human and therefore reasonably subject to all manner of exploitation, torture, and abuse. This is the legacy of anti-Blackness in the United States. Even when the system ensnares a non-black person, the prison-industrial complex remains a structurally anti-Black apparatus, firmly rooted in the United States' ongoing reliance on the financial exploitation and social control of Black people. This can be seen in persistent disparities at all levels of the criminal legal system, from arrest through punishment.
>
> *We Do This 'Til We Free Us 60*

Scholars such as Kaba, Davis, Alexander, and many others trace the line from this country's founding on genocide and captive labor to the current "institutional archipelago" that includes prisons, schools, mental health facilities, and other tactics of undifferentiated control and confinement (Chapman, Cary, and Ben-Moshe 14). The dispositional perspective of who is "good" and who is "bad" as some intrinsic quality, compounded by the systematic targeting of people of color, specifically Black people, has led, at least in part, to the racism in our legal system that no amount of reform seems to be able to shift. Small reforms do little to address these root causes. And for the prison arts practitioner, structural racism and the public perception of incarcerated people combine with the lack of shared lived experiences or proximity to incarceration to forge the kind of well-meaning paternalism of the white savior complex.

## The Ecosystem of Rehabilitation

In the naming of an agency as a "Department of Corrections," as most state prison apparatuses call themselves, the expressed intervention on behalf of the state is to "correct"—to fix or set right that which is broken. Unfortunately, the targets of correction are individuals. An abolitionist lens might enable us to better apprehend the policies of abandonment and white supremacy that cause cycles of poverty, intergenerational trauma, underfunded education and healthcare, and scarcity of healthy food and water resources that lead to the surveillance, overpolicing, and

incarceration of targeted communities. It is these root causes that may be more appropriate for correction.

The modern penitentiary is rooted in reforms by Quakers and Protestants in the late 18th century to save souls by "isolating them in silent cells where they could reflect on the error of their ways, do penitence, and emerge as better people" (Gottschalk 47). This is the ultimate dispositional analysis. I have facilitated arts programming in three states—Arizona, Utah, and Colorado[10]—and the mission statements for all three Departments of Corrections indicate that we have not come too far from the late 18th-century perspective on the role of the prison:

> […] Facilitating structured programming designed to develop inmates' personal responsibility for their successful re-integration to the community through rehabilitative opportunities for change.[11]
>
> *Excerpt from Arizona Dept. of Corrections mission statement*

> Our team is devoted to providing maximum opportunities for offenders to make lasting changes through accountability, treatment, education, and positive reinforcement within a safe environment.
>
> *Excerpt from Utah Dept. of Corrections mission statement*

> To protect the citizens of Colorado by holding offenders accountable and engaging them in opportunities to make positive behavioral changes and become law-abiding, productive citizens.
>
> *Colorado Dept. of Corrections mission statement*

Each of these mission statements emphasizes the need for incarcerated people to change and does not account for any systemic failings that may need to change more urgently.

Furthermore, the discourse around rehabilitation in our culture and prison system positions incarcerated folks as those who "need" rehabilitation: lesser, broken individuals who require the support and guidance to become better, more functional members of society. In general, conversations about rehabilitation center around "criminological theories of volunteerism which posit that crime is a choice rather than the result of complex interrelated social, political, and personal circumstances *and* individual choice" (McAvinchey 79). As the Colorado Department of Corrections training states, "Offenders made the choice … to make a career of crime" (Colorado Department of Corrections 2020). If the framework is one founded entirely on the concept that criminal behavior is based solely on individual choice, then rehabilitation consists of teaching incarcerated people "right" from "wrong" and taking personal responsibility for mistakes, rather than supporting a

process of self-determination in which the individual can objectively examine her choices in the context of social factors. The results are the kind of conversion or redemptive narratives found in the rehabilitation narrative.

The framing of incarceration as rehabilitation allows little space for acknowledging the dynamic individual in the present moment. This is a kind of *mis*recognition in which outsiders coming to work with incarcerated individuals "mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor 25). If any of the system's energy is expended on the "inmate" or "offender" at all, it is for their eventual "reentry," which includes workforce preparedness and an image of respectability as captured in the notion of "law-abiding, productive citizens." I can attest that in most prisons where I have created programs, I have had to argue for the participation of people with life sentences, as prison staff barred these folks from joining, since, in the logic of the prison, enrichment opportunities for "lifers" do not benefit society as these people will not be released. This is a fundamentally capitalist and transactional approach to humanity. Capital transforms input into outputs: put in rehabilitation in the form of so-called "pro-social skills," get out a respectable, law-abiding citizen. Anything outside this formula is not worth the resources. Prison-based artists who posit reform measures and rehabilitation for incarcerated people, even if the perspective is paternalistic and lacks critical analysis, are perceived as progressive and, in contrast to retribution, they are. Abolition does not even figure into the equation; unless we pursue other narratives, we lack imagination of what justice might be.

This way of thinking also implies Zimbardo's dispositional analysis, seeing a person's incarceration as a result of individual shortcomings or personal failures, not accounting for situational or systemic failings, such as the "racial and class-based disparities in arrest and imprisonment rates" (Davis *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 113). When situational and systemic factors are addressed in rehabilitation narratives, it often sounds like positivist notions of mental health, addiction, and trauma that point blame at neighborhoods, family systems, the drug market, gangs, etc., mistaking symptoms for cause. Again, the target of correction is not the larger structural issues of white supremacy and class violence that led to the policies of abandonment that set the conditions for the cycles of trauma listed.

Like positive youth development models which are future-focused and in which an individual young person is viewed as an un-formed person undergoing development, so too the rehabilitation model treats the incarcerated person as "mis-formed" or incomplete (Woodson 58). The mis-formed "offender" requires correction through the means of breaking down and remaking the person in the institutionalized image. Few enrichment programs are offered in prisons and, of the ones that are, the vast majority are affiliated with religious groups, commonly Evangelical Christian groups. Almost all the rest of the programs are Alcoholics Anonymous-style addiction recovery programs.[12] Both programmatic offerings reinforce the image of the prisoner-under-development predicated on the ideas that the path to redemption or recovery, respectively, is found through atonement or making amends. Development