

# *Dis-epistemologies of Abolition*

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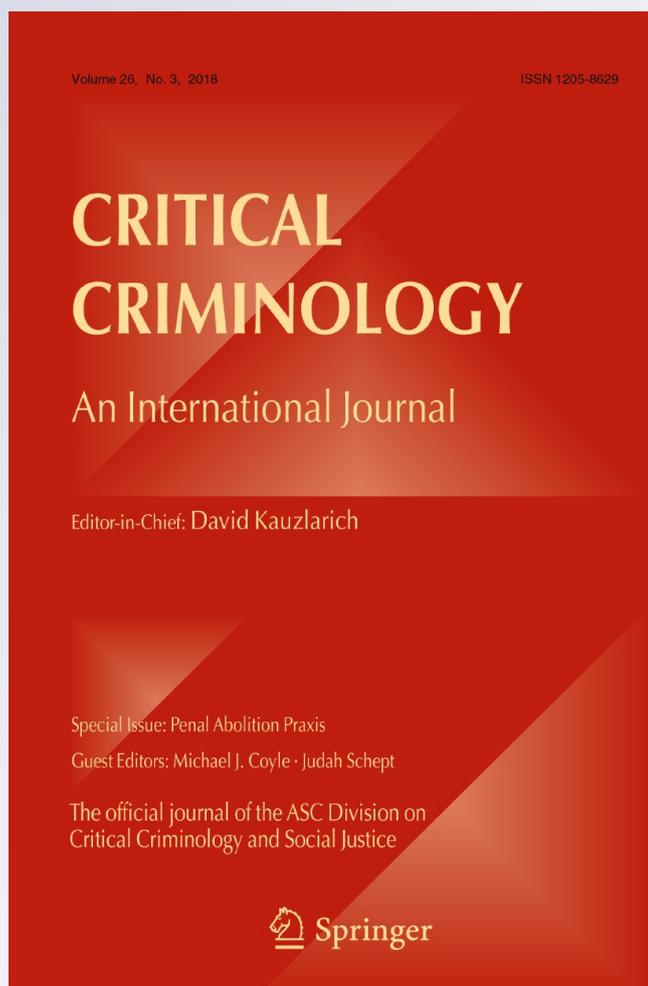
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## Dis-epistemologies of Abolition

Liat Ben-Moshe<sup>1,2</sup> 

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### Abstract

There are various critiques laid out against the framework of carceral abolition (as it appears currently in prison abolition and deinstitutionalization): that it is abstract, only critiques but does not suggest specific solutions; that it is a utopian vision of the world; and that it is unrealistic in the world we currently occupy. Throughout this article I will demonstrate how such critiques can be conceptualized as strengths of these movements and frameworks for liberation. I argue that carceral abolition (as it appears in prison abolition and deinstitutionalization) is a form of knowledge, an ethical position. My first claim is that this knowledge is rooted in maroonage and I show the consequences of not engaging with abolition from intersectional frameworks. My second claim is that we can understand abolition as a dis-epistemology that rejects ways of knowing tied to certainty, optimism and certain notions of futurity and temporality.

There are various critiques laid out against the framework of carceral abolition (as it appears in prison abolition and deinstitutionalization): that it is abstract, offers only critiques but does not suggest specific solutions; that it is a utopian vision of the world; and that it is unrealistic in the world we currently occupy. To counter these critiques I posit that abolition is an epistemology and an ethical demand towards a non-carceral future.

Because dismantling the walls of the prison by itself will not eliminate the use of policing and punishment (Davis 2000; Sudbury 2004), beginning in the 1990s, some scholar/activists moved from promoting prison abolition to conceptualizing *penal* abolition more broadly (Morris 1995). Penal abolitionism, according to critical criminologist Willem De Haan (1990) has three domains: a social movement aimed at abolishing current punitive penal structures; a theoretical perspective reconceptualizing oppression within carceral and criminal (in)justice spaces and their resistance; and a strategy that promotes the creation of a more equitable, safe and just society. These three components cannot be separated and although below I offer a more conceptual mediation on the epistemology and etymology of abolition, it is not divorced from activism, and not only in the penal arena.

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Although most of the examples I provide here come from prison abolition activism, by 'carceral locales' I am referring to more than prisons to encompass a variety of enclosures such as psychiatric hospitals, detention centers and residential institutions for people with disabilities, to name a few. By 'carceral' I am also referring to not only physical spaces but to particular logics and discourses that abolition (penal/prison/carceral) opposes. As such, the paper draws and connects to the nascent sub-field of critical carceral studies (Brown and Schept 2017), by also expanding what 'carceral' means beyond criminalization and imprisonment.

The paper is comprised of two main parts. The first discusses abolition as a unique epistemology with specific focus on how intersectionality and maroonage complicates and compliments abolitionary knowledges and the concept of abolition itself. The second part is devoted to understanding abolition as rejection of specific ways of knowing- of "knowing alls" (in the form of experts, prescriptive solutions); of certainty; rationality and finality. Finally, I will suggest that painting abolition as utopian and unrealistic are actually strengths of this unique form of resistance. My hope is that this theoretical mediation foregrounds a way towards a non-carceral future.

## Etymology of Abolition

The term abolition, as used in the context of penal abolition, emerged, from and alludes to demands to end the transatlantic slave trade. In "new/neo slavery" arguments, imprisonment is perceived as acting as a continuation of and through the lineage of chattel slavery (Davis 1998, 2000; Gilmore 2000; James 2005). The 13th of the U.S Constitution abolished slavery except for those convicted of crimes, leading to the convict lease system and the prison industrial complex, which are on a continuum as sites of warehousing the racialized underclass.

As historian Chase (2015) reminds us though, this was not a metaphorical connection everywhere. If "Outside the South, the discourse that prisons constituted slavery was a metaphorical organizing principle that condemned the entire prison system as a form of American apartheid ...", that was not the case in the South, where the rallying cry of prison slavery "had the added physical reality that southern prison farms forced unpaid prisoners to toil on former plantations in racially segregated groups to pick cotton under the supervision of white prison "bosses" and convict guards, and the prisoners faced routine corporal punishment and State-orchestrated sexual assault." This analysis is important for two reasons. The first, is that the relation between imprisonment and slavery changes based on race and geography; and secondly because it shows imprisonment not as a solution to violence but instead as de facto (sexual) violence by the State, a point I will return to later.

But there is disagreement within contemporary carceral abolition praxis and thought about how to conceptualize and whether to emphasize the slavery-imprisonment link. For example, political theorist Marie Gottschalk (2006) suggests that imprisonment in the U.S. at present is so vast that it diminishes all other phenomena in comparison, as so few blacks were actually a part of the convict lease system in the South. Other scholars (Wacquant 2009) critique the slavery-prison as an analogy and State that only a minority of the prisoners actually get the privilege of working for wages while imprisoned.

Many prison abolitionists, however, claim that the slavery argument in abolition activism is about the lineage of oppression and segregation based on race and color in the U.S.,

not necessarily about labor per se. These proponents do not perceive imprisonment as exactly *like* slavery but rather view incarceration as a continuation of the same racist (and settler) logic (James 2005; Rodriguez 2006; Sudbury 2004, 2008). As Kim Gilmore suggests: “The point of retracing this history is not to argue that prisons have been a direct outgrowth of slavery, but to interrogate the persistent connections between racism and the global economy” (2000: 195). Drawing these links has been important in “explaining the relationship between racism and criminalization after emancipation, and in connecting the rise of industrial and mechanized labor to the destructive effects of deindustrialization and globalization” (2000: 195). The object of the prison-industrial-complex, under these critical perspectives, is not so much profit making from prisoners’ labor or private prisons, as much as it is about containment and elimination of certain segments from civil society (Davis 2000; Gilmore 2006). Therefore, some draw on the framework of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983; Gilmore 2002) more broadly, in which white supremacy is but one manifestation.

For those taking a broader approach to centering blackness in analyzing politics and resistance, or what has come to be called afropessimism, civil society itself (and not its drawbacks or abuses) is understood as a State of emergency (Hartman 1997; Patterson 1982). According to such theorists, left (radical) desires to anchor politics of liberation in economic conditions (like prisons for profit) is a refusal to grapple with white supremacy (Martinot and Sexton 2003). Categories like exploitation, labor, progress and hegemony are incommensurable with the black subject. According to Orlando Patterson, the slave doesn’t enter into a relation of value exchange; she has no symbolic value and can only enter by relation of force and irrationality. Wilderson (2003) therefore asks- what does it mean to enter the anticapitalist struggle not as a worker, but as an excess, a scandal to civil society?

Similar arguments and disagreements can be found regarding the “New Jim Crow” thesis. The thesis, popularized by Michelle Alexander (2012) states that just as Jim Crow was a repressive response to the abolition of slavery (and the desire for equality and black reconstruction), mass incarceration was a response to the civil rights movement. Although the latter was accomplished through race baiting and claiming law and order while being race neutral.<sup>1</sup> But the Jim Crow analogy also does not work on several counts: One is the lack of intersectional analysis, especially in relation to gender/sexuality (see Ritchie 2017 for a corrective), disability and class. Legal scholar James Forman Jr. (2012) shows that for African American men with some college education, the probability of being imprisoned actually decreased slightly between 1979 and 1999. So the issue is not just anti-black racism but its deadly coupling (to paraphrase Stuart Hall) of race with class (and gender).

Forman and others also suggest that a limitation of the slavery (or Jim Crow) analogy in anti-prison organizing is that it erases the presence of non-black prisoners of color, including the growing incarceration of indigenous and Latino/immigrant populations. But as Chase demonstrates in regards to Southern prisons: “the universality of prison abuse in the American South allowed prisoners of non-African American dissent, particularly Chicano prisoners, to share in the discourse that southern prisons created modern slavery” (2015: 81). This was not the case everywhere, but recent strikes and calls for work stoppages (for paid and unpaid labor) in US prisons show that ‘prison slavery’ offers a unique tool for

<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘race neutral’ as opposed to ‘color blind’, which I find to be a confusing and ableist term.

mobilizations and solidarity amongst incarcerated people and speaks to their experience, even in 2017.

Relatedly, Sudbury (2008) offers the term “maroon abolitionists” to refer to the subjugated knowledges of activists and those incarcerated who are of color. Maroon,<sup>2</sup> as opposed to black/white binaries, could imply the possibility of coalitions as opposed to designations based on simplistic color lines. I want to suggest here that maroon knowledges should be centered on anti-black racism but can also apply to other fugitives such as queer, disabled (white or of color) and those of color who are not black.

In a recent article in *Jacobin*, Roger Lancaster staged a scathing critique of the abolitionist approach and its pitfalls for leftist activism. I will not give it credence here but two particular claims are useful to unpack. In the piece Lancaster states that: “abolitionism promises a heaven-on-earth that will never come to pass” (2017 N/A) and that “Abolitionists base their approach on an analogy between the prison system and chattel slavery. This is a strained analogy.... The better analogy might be with other disciplinary institutions, which also to varying degrees curb freedoms in the name of personal and social good: the school, the hospital, the psychiatric institution” (Lancaster 2017). As my work and others’ (Ben-Moshe, Chapman and Carey 2014) had demonstrated, the connection between psych facilities or hospitals and prisons is not an *analogy* at all. People with disabilities (and those labeled as disabled or insane) are and have been confined in a variety of carceral settings, including psychiatric hospitals, rehab facilities and nursing homes. My larger work shows that learning from movements that closed down these spaces and their accompanying segregationist logics is not analogues work but part of imagining and creating a non-carceral present and future. My claim in this paper is that these knowledges are also part of epistemologies of abolition, building on and connected to prison/penal abolition. All these movements showcase ‘fugitive’ knowledges, in the words of Hames-Garcia (2004) and Harney and Moten (2013, whose work on the undercommons is echoed throughout this paper), but not metaphorically.

Within deinstitutionalization the *word* abolition is used at times, especially in regard to forced psychiatric confinement. I define abolition of psych incarceration in three ways: abolition as the act and process of closing down psychiatric hospitals; abolition of the rationale for long hospitalization and lastly the abolition of psychiatry. The second and third meanings can be seen in the lifelong work of Szasz (1961, 2002). Szasz’s work is foundational to any historiography of anti-psychiatry, although Szasz himself disliked and distanced himself from this term. A lesser known chapter in the movement/s that opposes psychiatry is the establishment in 1970 of the *American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization* by Thomas Szasz, Erving Goffman and George Alexander. Abolition is used in the organization’s name quite intentionally. As Szasz explained “the practice of involuntary psychiatric interventions—epitomized by civil commitment—is a moral atrocity, similar to the practice of involuntary servitude. This makes the abolition of that practice a precondition of so-called psychiatric reform.”<sup>3</sup> The platform of AAAIMH, although espousing the language of abolition, does distinguish between voluntary and involuntary psychiatric interventions. In his other writings, Szasz is critical of the artificial dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary hospitalization. If the only person who can order your release from psych institutions is a psychiatrist, then what does it matter if you

<sup>2</sup> Maroon refers to the communities of runaway slaves and indigenous people that have formed in the Americas since the seventeenth century.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.szasz.com/abolitionist.html>.

entered voluntarily or not, Szasz asks (2002).<sup>4</sup> Today, there are certainly currents within anti-psychiatry and mad movements that call for the abolition of psychiatry as a whole (Burstow et al. 2014).

Although the word abolition is not used as such, the first meaning of abolition as I define above (the act and process of closing down carceral spaces such as institutions and hospitals) was certainly at play in deinstitutionalization of those categorized as intellectually or developmentally disabled. Early on in the history of deinstitutionalization, self-advocates (people labeled as intellectually disabled who advocate for their rights) called for closing down all residential institutions for those with intellectual disabilities, which they saw as form of incarceration.<sup>5</sup> But the word abolition was not and is not used as the banner for the entire movement/s that sought to close down residential and psychiatric institutions for people with disabilities or those who fought for the desegregation of those with disabilities in separate facilities (for housing, services, education etc.). However, it seems to me that despite the many differences between prison/penal abolition and deinstitutionalization, the logic they resist is an anti-carceral one and at its core is about abolition epistemology and dis-epistemology.

## Maroon Knowledge for Abolition

Where does abolition knowledge come from then? Although there might be different pathways to becoming an abolitionist, I want to underscore here the kinds of intersectional fugitive/maroon abolitionist knowledge that originates and takes into account those who are most affected by State violence and capture, those for whom abolition for the future is already rooted in survival of the now. As Fanuzzi (2014) describes in his brief etymology of the term: ““Abolition” is a word we use when we want to activate scholarship with a sense of urgency, relevance, or potential for the future.” The key word here being urgency.

Even though abolition alludes to slavery, not all forms of abolition center (anti-black) racism or racial capitalism. Fanuzzi contends that under its nineteenth century conceptualization, abolition was about the liberation of humanism, humanitarianism and *white* sensibility that degenerated due to the immorality of slavery. In that respect, “The nineteenth-century “colonization movement,”... was an abolition movement in the eighteenth-century sense of the word, to the extent that it identified both slavery and enslaved Africans as obstacles to the moral and national development of whites in the United States” (2014: N/A). It was not until a decade, or more, later that abolition (of slavery) would take up the broad coalitional liberation as a movement and concept that it connotes today.

Through a discussion of the congruence and continuity of slavery and penal abolition, Vivienne Saleh-Hanna (2015) shows how abolition that is rooted in color neutrality or white supremacy (as these are interchangeable for her) is a failure for liberation. To show this, Saleh-Hanna discusses the notorious case of Margaret Garner, an enslaved African American woman who killed her daughter because she did not want her to be returned to life of captivity. Through this historical case (later fictionalized in Toni Morrison’s

<sup>4</sup> The organization disbanded in 1980. Szasz (2002) book alludes to slavery and its abolition and its relation, or mostly analogy to, psychiatry. I discuss this history and the AAAMH in more detail in my larger project.

<sup>5</sup> In 1979 for example, self-advocates in Nebraska held a press conference stating that all institutions should be closed. See Williams and Shoultz (1982).

*Beloved*) Saleh-Hanna (2015) shows that connections between prison abolition and abolition of slavery are not just semantic.

While white slavery abolitionists advocated for Margaret to be tried for murder (as this would establish her and her deceased daughter as human beings and not property), white pro slavery advocates wanted her to be tried for theft or simply returned to her owner for punishment (which is what eventually happened). No side even remotely suggested freeing Margaret from bondage. Therefore, Saleh-Hanna suggests: "Though seemingly diametrically opposed, each White side of this bloody tale stands firmly rooted in anti-Blackness driven and legitimated by their own images of White superiority. On one side of White colonialism's coin stand slaveholders and their plantations built on stolen lands hanging on, by any means necessary, to a White supremacist slave economy of anti-Black exploitation. On the other side of capitalism's racist coin stand White (self-proclaimed) anti-slavery abolitionists and their criminal justice system built upon a stolen sense of justice, hijacked and replaced by imperialist and racialized constructions of crime and criminality" (2015; page n/a).

While white abolitionists were fighting against slavery out of moral, religious and ideological convictions, "maroon abolitionists" were fighting for their communities' liberation and survival. Julia Oparah's (Sudbury 2008) insightful work on present day "maroon abolitionists," continues in the praxis of the black radical tradition and brings to light the unique prison abolition perspectives of gender oppressed and activists of color who are rooted in African diasporic traditions of resistance and spirituality. Maroon also implies the resistance of non-black populations such as indigenous and exiled whites. Through this fugitive knowledge these activists therefore rejected the call for gradual emancipation and called instead for an immediate end to slavery, not just on moral or ethical grounds but based on their desire to stay alive, as do present day imprisoned intellectuals (Rodriguez 2006) and maroon abolitionists (Sudbury 2008).

Avery Gordon (2004) further alludes to this sense of urgency of abolition demands that are rooted in maroonage and suggests that the core of abolitionism is its refusal to wait. According to Gordon, and following Toni Cade Bambara, abolition efforts must take place while people are still enslaved. She states "abolition time is a type of revolutionary time. But rather than stop the world, as if in an absolute break between now and then, it is a daily part of it" (Gordon 2004: 198). Emancipation is ongoing work and cannot wait until the time is ripe for it. Slaves, captives or prisoners, and those fighting for their freedom, cannot wait for a new world order in order to be free of incarceration or bondage. They cannot wait until the right conditions emerge and the desired future begins.

This characterization of abolition could also be seen in the case of deinstitutionalization activists who insisted on a non-carceral and inclusive world and demanded to close all institutions for those with intellectual disabilities and all psychiatric hospitals much before alternatives to institutionalization were in place. The goal was to close down institutions at present and refute the segregationist discourse while the alternatives were not ready-made and indeed could not have been, as such a framework did not exist at that time (Ben-Moshe 2013).

Cohen (2011) and Spade (2015) and others urge us to frame issues of criminalization and incarceration through what Ferguson (2004) described as a queer of color critique, which questions traditional white liberal approaches to social problems (such as calls requiring more legislation, incorporation within the system etc.) but instead to understand them through an intersectional lens that has a broader analysis of what freedom and liberation might be. I suggest that disability of color critique of incarceration and abolition is not just about those who identify as disabled people of color who are caught up in these

systems. It's about understanding policing, incarceration and its alternatives as disability issues, with everything such reformulation entails- from theorizing disposability of certain populations and their susceptibility to premature death (which is Gilmore's definition of racism<sup>6</sup>); to understanding the nature of systems of capture and exclusion; to discussions of alternatives to these systems and envisioning shared horizons. It's about understanding anti-black racism as composed of pathologization and dangerousness, which leads to processes of criminalization and disablement (for instance, constructing people as Other, as deranged, crazy, illogical, unfathomable, scary), which is what I call elsewhere (Ben-Moshe forthcoming) processes of racial criminal pathologization.

## Abolition Dis-epistemology

My second claim in this paper is that abolition is a radical epistemology, which is about both knowing and unknowing. The second meaning in which abolition operates is as giving way to other *ways* of knowing. I term this dis-epistemology, letting go of attachment to certain ways of knowing. This does not mean letting go of only hegemonic knowledge, although that is certainly part of the abolitionist critique. What I mean by dis-epistemology is letting go of the idea that anyone can have a definitive pathway for how to rid ourselves of carceral logics. It is this attachment to the idea of knowing and *needing to know* that is part of knowledge and affective economies that maintain carceral logics. I suggest that abolition is dis-epistemology in three ways: it is about letting go of attachments to forms of knowledge that rely on certainty (what are the definitive consequences of doing or not doing); prescription and professional expertise (tell us what should be done); and specific demands for futurity (clairvoyance- what will happen).

A key characteristic of abolition dis-epistemology is rejecting absolutism, foreclosing certainty (what must be done, what will lead to the best results, what can we do now that will lead to a non carceral future). In his groundbreaking work on "The Politics of Abolition", Thomas Mathiesen conceptualizes abolition as an alternative in the making: "The alternative lies in the unfinished, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing" (Mathiesen 1974: 1). Abolition therefore, by definition, cannot wait for a future constellation when appropriate alternatives are already in place. This is inherently impossible because alternatives cannot come from living in the existing order, but from a process of change that will come as a result of a transition from it.

The characterization of abolition as rejection of certainty is also connected to feminist philosopher Ami Harbin's (2016) conceptualization of 'disorientation', which she defines as "temporarily extended, major life experiences that make it difficult for individuals to know what to do" (2016: 2). In other words, it means experiencing serious (prolonged and major) disruption so that one does not know what to do. The hope generated by Harbin's analysis, is that these experiences of disorientation, although often unpleasant and jarring can also be productive.

Beth Richie (2012) eloquently details this phenomenon in her aptly named chapter about the anti intimate partner violence movement in the U.S "How we won the mainstream but lost the movement." The title of the chapter is as telling as its analysis—Going mainstream

<sup>6</sup> "The State-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."

is counter abolitionary, and that is one of the points that Richie (2012) artfully makes. But I want to pause at the use of the term “movement” here. One interpretation is the loss of the social movement, the grassroots coalition that sought to stop violence against women. But there is another interpretation which seems to me as relevant here. It is not just the coalition that was lost, but movement itself, the act of moving. Abolition is always in flux, an ongoing struggle and therefore when we stop moving the social movement and the movement towards abolition literally dies. The goal of abolition is therefore not finality but process itself, trial and error, and in understanding disorientation as generative.

## Prescriptive Solutions

Deputies will lead the way toward concrete changes in the face of crisis. Be smart, they say. Believe in change. This is what we have been waiting for. Stop criticizing and offer solutions. Set up roadblocks and offer workshops. Check ID's and give advice... But we're not smart. We plan. (Harney and Moten 2013: 82)

Abolition efforts are often described as not being prescriptive and not offering specific solutions and therefore as being not useful. Some opponents (be it progressives who believe in reform or those wanting to maintain the status quo) posit this stance as “if you can't offer a specific solution, then you are part of the problem.” But as an epistemology and ethical stance, abolition politics invites us to abandon our attachment to knowing and especially to knowing all(s).

Following Mathiesen, abolition is triggered by making people aware of the necessary dilemma they are faced with- continuing with the existing order with some changes (i.e. reform) or transitioning to something unknown. The question becomes not “what is the best alternative” in its final formulation, but how this new order shall begin from the old. In this sense a question that emerges from the “unfinished” as alternative, is how to maintain it as such, a sketch, not a final result but a process (Mathiesen 1974). It is precisely for this reason that Mathiesen's work has often been criticized for lacking any concrete suggestions for penology or even activism, and therefore perceived as abstract and detached from specific activist and policy stances. The *common* sense (common sense gun policy, common sense policy, common sense policing) obstructs the *undercommons* as Harney and Moten (2013) refer to it. Reclaiming abolition as dis-epistemology and its lack of certainty would solidify abolition as fashioning new ways of envisioning the world and opening up opportunities that are not closed off by readymade prescriptions.

A related critique posed against abolition, is that carceral abolition also actively opposes certain kinds of solutions and desires. Abolition critiques the carceral system and carceral logics, but also critiques efforts to *reform* carceral sites, because some of the factors leading to the growth of the carceral State were the direct result of attempts to reform the system. This is also directly linked to the lineage of abolition of slavery. As Kim Gilmore (2000) explains, “The connections between slavery and imprisonment have been used by abolitionists as a historical explanation and as part of a radical political strategy that questions the feasibility of “reform” as an appropriate response to prison expansion.”

In practice, reform and abolition are on a continuum. For example, in *Politics of Abolition*, Mathiesen (1974) follows Andre Gorz's distinction between reformist and ‘non-reformist’ reforms. Reformist reforms are situated in the status quo, so that any changes are made within or against this existing framework. Non reformist reforms imagine a different horizon and are not limited by a discussion of what is possible at present. Mathiesen states

that non-reformist reforms that are effective need to be of the abolishing kind. The question is what kinds of reforms are sought and whether they will strengthen the system in the long run (Ben-Moshe 2013; Kaba 2014). For instance, fighting for adequate health care for prisoners is something abolitionists often support, as a non-reformist reform. However, some initiatives such as mental health jails are opposed by abolitionists, as these would only expand the scope of incarceration in the long haul.

But, critics say, if everything offered can be conceived as being reformist, what solutions does the abolitionist offer? I suggest that this question is rooted in the kind of epistemological assumptions that are better abandoned by abolitionists. This demand only makes sense if it is engrained in privileged positionality and not in intersectional subjugated knowledge, or maroonage, as those already oppressed do not feel secure in the first place. In short, as Ahmed (2010a) explains, this is the work of the feminist killjoy: “Feminists, by declaring themselves feminists, are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness” (2010a: 581). Feminists (and other affect aliens, as Ahmed refers to them, including abolitionists) “hence brings others down, not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained, by erasing the signs of not getting along” (2010a: 582). If we take this one step further to intersectional struggles “The angry black woman can be described as a killjoy; she may even kill feminist joy, for example, by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics” (2010a: 583).

The call of “don’t talk about it unless you have a solution” assumes there is a monolithic answer to the question of ‘what is to be done’. As Davis (2003) contends, as abolitionists, thinking about substitutions to prisons or incarceration is inapt. Instead we should conceptualize a world without the footprint of the prison. That is exactly the problem with carceral locales—such as detention centers, psych hospitals, prisons—they become catch all solutions to diverse social issues. One of the difficulties of conceptualizing a world without prisons is that many think about a monolithic system that will replace the punitive one we have now. Instead, we will need to deal with to handle certain harms and their effects in a myriad of ways.

Abolitionists work on a case by case basis in their campaigns, research and calls for action. They are often in a position of not knowing what to do. This seeming chasm between pragmatism and vision for the future of a non-carceral society are not necessarily binary opposites, especially if we think about it through the duality of the both/and approach suggested by Harbin (2016) in relation to the epistemology of disorientation as being generative.

## Reforming the State

These fugitive knowledges, rooted in maroonage, often contrast with reform based demands of the State, that seek specific solutions and policies without understanding that the State is violent itself and without regard to intersectionality; carceral logics are State logics and are often used to pass oppressive ‘solutions’ (such as improving prisons or psych hospitals) but ones that are seen as winnable under the formation of the neoliberal racial capitalist settler State.

In contrary to dis-epistemology, the push for specific solutions (especially those that translate into demands of the State) rarely end well, especially for those ‘living against the grain’ (Harbin 2016). For example, abolition feminists offer a troubling case study of

the ways current forms of “whitewashed” justice occurred in the anti-violence movement. Richie (2012) shows how anti-violence feminists’ demands of the State resulted in specific policy changes: domestic violence shelters opened, professional counseling began to be offered to women experiencing intimate violence, and legislation and legal changes followed suite, including the enactment of VAWA (violence against women act of 1994). But these policy shifts did not lead to the liberation of all women, but instead became an apparatus of the State and assisted in the buildup of the prison nation.

Specifically, it was a White liberal version of feminism seeking the liberation of women from patriarchal violence under the umbrella of the ‘universal woman,’ which is by default white, cisgender, heteronormative and middle class. As Richie contends: “when the national discussion became organized around “it could happen to anyone”, “it” was reduced to direct physical assault from household members and stranger rape, and “anyone” came to mean the women with the most visibility, the most power, and the most public sympathy, the citizens whose experience of violence is taken most seriously” (2012: 92). In essence, the focus became on White ideals of womanhood, and the need to protect them from either intimate assailants or strange men of color (stranger danger<sup>7</sup>).

Similarly, Whalley and Hackett (2017) state that “correctional institutions adopt a ‘culture of treatment’ .... Thereby assuming that impoverished and racially marginalized women need to be protected and fixed in the first place”, and for ‘crimes’ and traumas made by the State itself. As Kandaswamy (2006) asks, in relation to the anti-domestic violence movement: “What kind of identities are we forced to adopt and police when we engage in State centered politics? ... and finally, what passes as politics in an era when incarceration and/or normalization are increasingly represented as the only solutions to social problems?”

A similar trajectory can be described in regards to disability rights movements, most of which do not center race analysis (esp. anti-black racism) and that is one of the shortcomings of their approach to abolition. The consequences of not engaging in abolition from an intersectional lens rooted in maroonage is that it becomes irrelevant to the majority of those it seeks to liberate (see Puar 2017); both demographically (as it is not based on the lived experience of people of color) but especially race as a lens rooted in black radical tradition of understanding the State as violent and not the arena to seek remediation to injustice.

## Abolition, Optimism and Futurity

In addition to letting go of attachments to certainty (knowing what to do in its final formulation), I suggest that another characteristic of abolition dis-epistemology is letting go of attachment to clairvoyance, or the ability to see the future. Here I want to focus specifically on attachment to optimism in relation to futurity. In order to counter the vast critiques and sheer repression that comes from holding abolitionist views, there is a temptation to be overly optimistic about what a non-carceral future might bring. (And just for full disclosure, I use this trope myself as well). In order to critique the present, the claim that is often made is that whatever a non-carceral future holds it will surely be better than what we have now. So even

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<sup>7</sup> See the insightful work of Erica Meiners (2009) on the topic of ‘stranger danger’ and sex offender registries.

if we close down all prisons, residential institutions for people with disabilities and other segregationist locales, the argument goes, that act by itself alone would be better than the present system of State capture. Even just this act will be progress, improvement, and movement.

The critique over such affective registers should be familiar to those attuned to recent debates on futurity in queer theory and disability studies (Kafer 2013). Specifically, it is related to the barrage of queer of color critique of the “It gets better campaign” (Puar 2010). The campaign played on the same affective register of ‘the future is better no matter what’ that can be found in some abolitionist discourses. The 2011 campaign came as a response to the high number of suicides of LGBTQ and gender variant teens. Don’t give up now, “it” will get better. ‘It’ signifying here a person’s life chances, progress, proximity to assimilation i.e. success; as opposed to ‘it’ the material conditions of oppression. But ‘it’ only gets better from a certain privileged locale and reliance on such tropes forecloses other important queer affects (like failure—Halberstam 2011 or unhappiness—Ahmed 2010b).

My argument therefore is not to suggest that there is no possible answer to the question posed by Lenin at the turn of the last century and conjured up by Gilmore (2011) in regards to prison abolition- “What Is To Be Done?” Quite the opposite, I want to suggest that there are perhaps infinite answers to this question. But they are made invisible in our current paradigms (of criminal ‘justice’ or rehabilitation for example).

In suggesting the *perhaps* infinite possibilities abolition conjures up I am using the term ‘perhaps’ quite intentionally, following theorist Sara Ahmed. At the end of her essay on the feminist history of (un)happiness Ahmed suggests that “The word happy originally meant having “good ‘hap’ or fortune,” to be lucky or fortunate” (2010a: 574). But in relation to the feminist killjoy, Ahmed suggests that “In refusing to be constrained by happiness, we can open up other ways of being, of being perhaps. The word perhaps shares its hap with happiness.... To deviate from the paths of happiness is to refuse to inherit the elimination of the hap” (2010a: 593).

I therefore posit that living in the ‘perhaps’ is the position of the abolitionist. Not knowing how things end up is not a disadvantage but in fact opens up possibilities of other life worlds that cannot be imagined right now. Refusing narratives of happy endings and living in ‘perhaps’ does not equate hopelessness though. As Ahmed suggests in relation to Audre Lorde’s writings in *The Cancer Journals*, the positionality expected of Lorde while battling and coming to terms with living with cancer is to stay positive, look at the bright side, not be an angry black woman, not be a feminist killjoy. This disabled/wounded positionality that Lorde occupied during this time allotted her the foresight to refuse demands for certainty and futurity, as well as the ableist trope of ‘getting over it’ and ‘it gets better’. In fact, she refused the whole individualistic discourse which she found stultifying and baffling. In Lorde’s words: “looking on the bright side of things is a euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life, the open consideration of which might prove threatening to the status quo” (Lorde 1997: 76). What do we lose then when we foreclose the future with optimism? How do we conjure up a non-carceral future without repeating the pitfalls of this world?

## The Necessity of the Utopian

What is, so to speak, the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society. (Harney and Moten 2013: 42)

From the inception of prison abolitionism as a movement, its activists were being dismissed as utopian and unrealistic. In “Cruising Utopia” queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz suggests that “we must strive, in the face of the here and now totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there” (2009: 1). For Muñoz, “the here and now is a prison house” (2009: 1). The connection to prison abolition are conjured up by this affirmation from Muñoz, and not simply because he brings up prison as the ultimate metaphor for stagnation and lack of imagination. Muñoz further discusses Ernst Bloch’s distinction between concrete and abstract utopias, explaining that concrete utopias represent collective hopes, and are the blocks upon which hope can exist. As Bloch writes “hope’s methodology... dwells in the region of the not-yet” (quoted in Muñoz 2009: 3). The “not-yet,” as Bloch refers to it, seems akin to Mathiesen’s formulation of the “unfinished” in relation to the work of the abolitionist.

When one is called “utopian” this usually connotes something degrading, a naïveté of sorts, that makes one look foolish or dangerous, depending on the context. In any case, utopia is not often a feature that makes one be taken seriously. However, Muñoz suggests that in spite of these possible consequences “a certain affective reanimation needs to transpire if a disabling political pessimism is to be displaced” (2009: 9). This suggestion only works of course as long as “disabling” connotes something destructive and not affirmative. It might be useful to connect this statement with an earlier one in which Muñoz suggests that the way out of stagnation is that “We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (2009: 1).

I want to suggest here that one way of reclaiming utopia is by reclaiming this “disabling political pessimism.” Following disability theorists such as Overboe (1999) and Mitchell and Snyder (2015), imagining “other ways of being in the world<sup>8</sup>” is the gist of disability culture. Disability, as a lived reality, in a world that often cannot contain it, allows for re-formulations of in/dependence and community. A non-carceral way of living would be unimaginable without these reconceptualizations and celebration of “other ways of being in the world.” I am not suggesting that these “other ways of being in the world” are currently materialized, but I am suggesting that their effects could provide useful ammunition for social transformation in the spirit of abolition as a utopian stance. As Patricia Berne states in regards to the formation of the paradigm of disability justice (which critiques liberal rights frameworks): “A Disability Justice framework understands that all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met....We are in a global system that is incompatible with life. There is no way stop a single gear in motion—we must dismantle this machine.” The goal is not to be integrated within the existing framework but to work towards the liberation of us all from it.

In the larger work this article grew out of, I show how deinstitutionalization (the mass closure of psychiatric hospitals and residential institutions for those labeled as intellectually disabled and the push towards community living) can be construed as a useful precursor to prison abolition (Ben-Moshe et al. 2014). Part of the critique of abolition is that it is utopian, and it will never happen; that it might work in small Nordic countries but is

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to keep in mind however that many of these accounts of disability culture and epistemology do not often provide the kind of intersectional analysis, especially in relation to race, that fugitive knowledges demand, see also Puar (2017).

unachievable in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> But deinstitutionalization shows that it can happen and it did happen (at least in the form of decarceration and excarceration, as new admissions to psych facilities and residential institutions for those with intellectual disabilities had drastically decreased and those residing in these spaces had moved out, in most US states).

In a conversation, activists/scholars and longtime abolitionists Angela Y. Davis and Dylan Rodriguez describe prison abolition as much bigger than a critique of incarceration, but rather providing a broader critique of society (Davis 2000a). Thus, prison abolition insists not only on ridding ourselves of imprisonment but of carceral logics, while also imagining “a new world order” in the absence of the carceral archipelago and its logics. As Davis (2000) suggests, “The call for prison abolition urges us to imagine and strive for a very different social landscape.”

Abolition is not just an agenda for demolishing but also for building. As Gilmore suggests: “In other words, the goal is to change how we interact with each other and the planet by putting people before profits, welfare before warfare, and life over death” (2014: p. viii)

When a system is abolished there is a danger that other systems that fulfill the same functions would arise to fill in the void left by the abolished system. Famed sociologist W.E. B Du Bois, in his book *Black Reconstruction* (1935), discusses (slavery) abolition not as a mere negative process, one of tearing down. It is ultimately about creating new institutions and a new society that values them. Du Bois was insistent that in order to abolish slavery in modern times, new democratic institutions had to be established and maintained. Because that did not occur, slavery found a new home in Jim Crow, convict lease systems, segregated education (by race and today by ability) and mass incarceration. Thus, the abolition of slavery was only successful in the negative aspect, but no new institutions were created to successfully incorporate black people (freed slaves and those not enslaved) into the existing social order. The carceral State today have thrived precisely because of the lack of such resources that Du Bois was arguing for. Angela Davis reminds us, via Du Bois, that incarceration today cannot be abolished until the project of abolition democracy is accomplished (Davis 2005). She thus connects Du Bois to current abolitionary struggles within the black radical tradition. Like Harney and Moten State, the goal is the abolition of a society that would have prisons and building a new one from the rubble. Being free of chains is only the beginning.

Abolition could be conceptualized as a radical form of activism in the full sense of the word, meaning going to the root cause of issues, in both content and form. Abolition can be further conceptualized as a strategy beyond resistance- as it does not acknowledge the structure as is but envisions and creates a new worldview in which oppressive structures do not exist. It goes beyond protesting the current circumstances, to creating new conditions of possibility by collectively contesting the status quo. It does so by means of movement, the unfinished, trial and error, but without recapitulating to affective necessities of State expansion, optimism, prescription and clairvoyance. Reclaiming utopia, unhappiness, uncertainty as liberatory dis-epistemologies would conceive abolition as helpful, and happy, in fashioning new ways of envisioning and being in the world.

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<sup>9</sup> Although I do draw here on conceptualizations from some European or diasporic theorists, my research and claims here are grounded in the North American context, particularly carceral abolition movements in the U.S., and should be read from this specific geographical and historical context.

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