NCSA 2024 Keynote Address: Beyond Research for Research's Sake: An Invitation to Abolition Feminism as Liberatory Praxis

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Introduction

The current moment with the genocide in Gaza, the ongoing pandemic, the reverberations of the 2020 uprising, exploding inflation, the climate crisis, and the world essentially being on fire in many other ways really compels us, I hope, to think seriously about how the work we do—whether its inside academia or not—is contributing to a better world. One framework through which I understand my work is the urgency of addressing carcerality as one of the most substantial, and violent, guiding principles of the US. The US's carceral orientation, undergirded by racial capitalism, impacts every single system we can examine as social scientists. Of course, this includes the criminal punishment system proper, but also, many others in what scholars call the "shadow carceral state" (Beckett and Murakawa 2012). In my own work, I've explored how carcerality impacts the child support enforcement system (Battle 2023), responses to gender-based violence (Battle and Powell 2024), immigration enforcement (Battle, Ubel, and Nepomnyaschy 2024), and other scholars have explored carcerality in education (Morris 2016; Rios and Vigil 2017; Shedd 2015), social services (Lara-Millán and Van Cleve 2017; Paik 2021), and even in the social sciences (Davies, Jackson, and Streeter 2021). So, if carcerality is so central to the work we do, then how do we ensure that our work does not reinforce carcerality, but instead develops a deeper understanding that helps us work against these forces?

I hope to offer an invitation to abolition feminism as a roadmap for a liberatory praxis, not only in our scholarship but in our lives. This invitation has been offered to me by our academic forebears and contemporary colleagues, but also importantly by my comrades and the communities I work alongside and to whom I do my best to remain accountable. In that way, this invitation and the content of this talk are not really mine to claim, but rather my attempt to contribute to a rich tradition that has been transformative for me in many ways. I draw from a variety of sources of data, insight, and influence—including a social science research paradigm I co-developed with my comrade and collaborator Uriel Serrano (Battle and Serrano 2022), a project called the pathways to abolition project that includes interviews with activists and organizers involved in the 2020 uprising (Battle 2022; Battle and Powell 2024), and words from thinkers, scholars, organizers, and others whom I admire and learn from.

My commitment to liberatory praxis is informed, guided, and cultivated by my understanding of the practice and promise of abolition feminism. Black scholars, particularly those within the Black feminist and womanist traditions, have long been making the case for abolition in academic spaces (Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007; James 2005; Richie 2005; Ritchie 2017), alongside practitioners and organizers outside academia doing the same. Organizations like INCITE and Critical Resistance both originating in the Bay Area have done the critical work of delineating as Angela Davis and collaborators (2022: x) describe "precisely why abolition must be feminist and why feminism must be abolitionist."

Contextualizing Abolition Feminism

As discussions of abolition have become more mainstream, so too have its misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and misrepresentations. Before we get into what abolition is, specifically what abolition feminism offers us, I will address some of what abolition is not or does not do. First, abolition is not a primarily destructive strategy but is instead about creating—strengthening what already exists for good and building those things which do not exist. Alexis Pauline Gumbs (Gumbs 2008) (2008: 145) begins her essay titled "Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina" by saying, "What if abolition isn't a shattering thing, not a crashing thing, not a wrecking ball event? What if abolition is something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you? What if abolition is something that grows?" Not only is Gumbs pointing here to the generative power of abolition, but she is also pointing us to its tenderness and its ability to sprout from pain.

Second, although abolition offers a vision of a world gone right, it does not presuppose a utopia. Abolition does not ignore that violence and harm happen, but it urges us to rethink how to deal with those things. It asks us to reimagine safety and reject the notion that justice is punishment (Battle 2022; Battle and Powell 2024). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out, "It's punishment that leads people to the conclusion in the first instance that the way you deal with a problem is by killing it," reminding us that "where life is precious, life is previous" (Intercepted 2020) In other words, the thirst for vengeance, which is a result of our socialization in this carceral society, is the very logic that allows white supremacist state violence to be carried out on the most vulnerable among us. At the same time, we understand the reality that many of us are constrained with our choices for safety now and that sometimes folks are forced to make use of the limited options available to them or may have had to use those options in the past. Abolition is a long-term project, and while we are working toward it, we often must make do with what we have.

Third, abolition does not ignore survivors of harm and violence. In fact, abolition puts those of us who have had personal experiences with violence at the center. Many of us who hold abolition as a practice have experienced some form of violence, whether from our loved ones, our community, the state, or all of the above. And from those experiences, we have found that police do not actually stop the violence. Instead, the police actually create and reinforce the conditions that make violence possible. Although the carceral creep of the 1990s constructed the criminal punishment system as the best response to gendered violence (Kim 2018), we know that police are some of the biggest perpetrators and beneficiaries of violence, particularly against Black women, femmes, and trans folks (Richie 2012; Ritchie 2017). To really keep us safe and support survivors, we have to build stronger community connections, train our communities in intervention methods, provide material resources for folks to address the root causes of crime, and have solid transformative justice processes in place for when harm and violence do occur.

Last, abolition does not require us to forgive or remain in community with people who have hurt us. It does not remove all consequences or sanctions for committing harm. Abolition does, however, require us to rethink how to use sanctions and also how to compel folks to participate in transformative justice processes without perpetuating the violence of the carceral state. A collective known as Generation FIVE (2007) has worked through what this might look like for cases of child sexual abuse and Transform Harm offers resources to think through community-based responses for domestic and other types of violence (transformharm.org). The transformative work of abolition is happening, and we can all build on it in our own communities.

Abolition Feminist Worldmaking In Academia

Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie (2022: 4) say, "Abolition feminism is a praxis—a politically informed practice—that demands intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression." They go on to call abolition feminism a now practice (Davis et al. 2022: 16), meaning we need it urgently. We cannot wait for tenure. We cannot wait for promotion to full. We cannot wait to have specific funding to do community-engaged work. We cannot wait. We must do this work now, and at all times, in pursuit of liberation. As Mariame Kaba and Rachel Herzing remind us, "There will be no magical day of liberation that we do not make" (Gabriel 2022). Liberation, safety, freedom, and justice are not going to rain down on us. We must do the messy, hard, clumsy work to actively pursue it. I hold space for those of us struggling, suffering, and resisting so much trauma, oppression, and violence that just our daily fight to exist alone is an act in a liberatory struggle, perhaps the only one we have space for. Nevertheless, I also encourage us all to think through how we might incorporate small things—maybe some that I offer here—to contribute to our collective struggle for liberation.

So, how do we do the work of liberation? What does the praxis of abolition feminism actually look like? How do we engage in this "now practice?" A strong guide for the work of abolition feminism comes from a participant in my Pathways to Abolition Project. For this study, my collaborator and I interviewed 55 activists and organizers who participated in the summer 2020 uprisings. When asked to describe what abolition meant to them, one participant drew from their study of the traditions of abolition to provide a framework that I have used ever since in my scholarship, my teaching, and my community organizing work. Moon, a Black and Korean trans healing practitioner said,

> I think the way I would define abolition work is like a three-step process…. I would say, abolition includes the dismantling component. There's always this dismantling component of abolition. You're dismantling shit. You're burning shit down. You're like, "Fuck this. We got to burn this specific system, state, whatever is oppressing us, we got to burn it down."... Then there's the being part of abolition work, right? So, kind of like the existing in community. Being in relationship. Building ways of figuring out how are we going to talk to each other? How are we going to sit in the same rooms together? How are we going to engage in relationship together?... And then I would say that the third component or really critical component of abolition work is the dreaming part. So, like, the dreaming, the building, the imagination…. So like, how are we dreaming up new worlds for us to exist and where we feel more free? What are we imagining is going to happen after we do the dismantling? And as we're doing the being like, what are we looking towards in the future?

Moon's triad definition of abolition is instructive for framing the main dimensions of the praxis as dismantling oppressive systems, building community, and dreaming of new worlds. In Moon's definition, and many others' similar conceptualizations, is the premise of abolition feminist worldmaking, where we, in beautiful community, rid the world of harmful systems and create a world that reflects our visions of freedom.

Dismantling Oppressive Systems

As scholars, most of us would hopefully agree that there is much to be dismantled when we look to the structures and systems that oppress the most vulnerable populations. But many of us often overlook how we might dismantle the practices and systems within academia that also contribute to oppression. For this reason, I focus my comments on dismantling oppressive systems in our own house, so to speak—that is, providing suggestions for how we might begin to take apart the forces within our profession that (re)produce the very types of unjust structures that we study. I first urge the dismantling of notions of objectivity. As Sylvia Tamale (2020) asserts, ideas of "universalism, objectivity, and neutrality" have always been an integral part of Europe's colonization of Africa (p. 20). In other words, the creation of difference and positioning of whiteness as superior has been made possible via the colonial logics of "objectivity." Similarly, Katherine Allen (2000) suggests, "the notion of objectivity is too often used as a shield behind which people in positions of power shape discourse and practice and … hide ideologically driven commitments" (p. 5). I suggest we take seriously the work of Black feminists globally to dismantle the distractions of calls for methodological "objectivity." We then must be honest and transparent about the motivations and commitments driving our work, allowing space for our scholarship to potentially serve as mechanisms of healing, care, and support instead of just lines on our CVs.

Secondly, I encourage us to question the symbolic and material boundaries between the "researcher" and the "researched." It is crucial to recognize that although our research participants may not be able to explain their experiences in the jargon of the social sciences, they are the people best equipped to describe their own experiences. They provide the foundations for our work, making them the producers of knowledge, and making social scientists just the interpreters. Julie Bettie (2014) asserts that binary insider/outsider or researcher/researched approaches do not "acknowledge the continuum of experience, relation sameness and difference, and degrees of intersubjectivity that allow for emotional empathy and political alliance." In this way, we understand the roles of "researcher" and "subject" as not mutually exclusive. We should then be committed to models of collaboration that have real material incentives for those traditionally viewed as the "researched." This understanding of "researcher" and "subject" further highlights the continuum along which researchers exist, particularly those of us who are in proximity to the topics we study. We then must also deconstruct the unquestioned assumption that distance from research subjects and participants represents ethical objectivity and closeness/relationships represent unethical subjectivity. Instead, following Black feminisms and disability justice thought, we can recognize that closeness to our participants brings a level of authenticity that is perhaps not available when the

researcher and participant share no common life experiences.

Lastly, I encourage us when and where we can to turn our gaze to the state. Although there is much to glean from capturing the experiences of individuals and groups experiencing inequality, it is at least as important to understand how the state is structured to produce oppression. Knowing the consequences of oppression in the lives of individuals does provide important evidence of these systems; however, much more is needed to dismantle the systems. Without interrogating the state's structuring of and motivations for oppressive forces, researchers are able to publish, secure funding, and advance in their careers off of the suffering of marginalized communities without having to engage directly with the source of their suffering nor commit to doing any work to dismantle those sources.

Building Community

I turn now to thinking about how we might build community in our scholarship through an abolition feminist lens. One participant from the Pathways to Abolition project, Scofio, a Black man organizer with more than two decades of experience working in his local community, thought about building an abolitionist framework in this way, "I don't want to reincarnate or reflect the systems that we have in any way, shape, or form. I want to reflect and project into the world something completely different, something that's centered on care and restoration. Something that's centered on people's well-being, something that realizes the power inherent in the community, to like, actually build the world and build the lives that we want and need." To build the communities and types of care networks that Scofio alludes to, we must also engage in ethical reflection on the role of our research and areas of study, our departments and universities, and our discipline in producing harm or exacerbating the carceral state and/or racial capitalist projects—far beyond the simple considerations of the IRB's concerns with ethics. Reflexivity has become more commonplace in research, with scholars often being asked to include reflexive statements in manuscripts that reflect on the ways that their identities may have impacted their research; however, these reflections of one's multiple identities alone are not enough. We must be real about the ways that building our careers can simultaneously tear down oppressed communities, and cultivate and maintain our own set of ethics that really sits with how we might (re)produce violence in our scholarly endeavors. My collaborator and I (Battle and Serrano 2022) offer five questions we believe can help us interrogate our positionality in our scholarship: "(1) How do we come to/develop an interest in the intellectual and physical sites of our study?, (2) How do we present in/show up to the space?, (3) What are our responsibilities to those we study? And to whom are we accountable beyond academia?, (4) What methodological approaches prevent us from actualizing an approach to research that is oriented toward justice?, and (5) If the social sciences have been responsible for pathologizing Black communities, Indigenous communities, queer folks, disabled folks, youth, for example, what responsibility do we have to make sure that we do not (re) produce problematic narratives, theories, and practices?" (p. 18) We cannot claim to be committed to justice while lending our skills, knowledge, and efforts to the very forces preventing justice from being reached, and simultaneously doing more harm to those already suffering and resisting under extreme state violence.

In addition, I urge us to consider what community looks and feels like for the folks with and for whom we engage in research. The research offices and Institutional Reviews Boards at our institutions are not primarily, or perhaps at all, concerned with building robust infrastructures for real community engagement in our research. For example, despite my institution having an Associate Dean position for Research and Community Engagement, we were unable to bypass draconian rules to drug test and background check individuals joining a Participatory Action Research project studying racialized criminalization and compliance mechanisms in the criminal legal and immigration systems. These requirements make it virtually impossible to hire system-impacted individuals, thus preventing us from carrying out research that is truly guided by those most impacted by the systems that we study. Such hiring policies directly reinforce carcerality and certainly do not offer the appearance or feel of a true commitment to community engagement and relationship building between institutions of higher education and the communities many academics infringe upon in their research. Those of us committed to real community engagement and building should be boldly pushing back against these types of policies and practices at every opportunity.

Last, I suggest taking seriously questions of access to research for the communities we study and hopefully work alongside. This includes considerations about how we disseminate findings, moving beyond a sole focus on academically intelligible products and incorporating methods of sharing our findings with those that are most impacted in ways that they can access. This might involve community workshops, arts-based products, and simply collaborating with the community to develop things that make sense for them/us. Also, this dimension of community building includes considerations over "ownership" of data. Who really

owns the data that we can only get from the community, is it really ours just because we collected it? Or does it belong to the people? Ultimately, at the most basic level, we must think through how we build collaborative processes that directly involve the community. We must think about how these communities are co-creators in the project of knowledge production and the development of research from inception to end and back again.

Freedom Dreaming

An abolition feminist liberatory praxis also requires us to fiercely dream—to imagine beyond what we can see what freedom, safety, justice, and liberation look and feel like. But to dream, we must work on understanding and clearing from our consciousness that which undergirds our (re)production of carcerality. In this way, one of the first practices of abolition feminism is to dismantle the police in our own minds. I urge us to begin or continue to work through our own allegiances to white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, transphobia, and ableism. These allegiances cause us to police others' bodies, to silence Black women's voices, to engage in respectability politics, to harm queer and trans folks, to speak ill of our colleagues, to ignore the struggles of the unhoused and incarcerated, to contribute to the harm of and lack of access for disabled folks, and to not practice revolutionary love. For ourselves, this also means abolishing the cop in our minds that polices the ways that we comport and contort our bodies, our voices, and our language to fit "the standard"—in essence to do what we must to dream of our own liberation. What would you wear, how would you dance, how would you speak if you were without the gaze of others (and yourself) that restricted your own liberation? We must start with a practice of liberation for ourselves. This call requires a real commitment to being anti-policing in our daily lives.

We can also incorporate dreaming into our scholarship. In Freedom Dreams, Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) explores how dreams for a new world are often situated at the intersections of social movements and intellectual pursuits. Kelley (2002) says that "any serious motion toward freedom must begin in the mind" (p. 5). Drawing parallels with Black radical feminisms, Kelley (2002) highlights that surrealists provide exactly the types of "imaginative, expansive, and playful" visions that are necessary to seek liberation. In this way, we must consider how to incorporate that imagination, expansiveness, and playfulness into our work. What would it mean for more of us to push the bounds of the empirical through real engagement with art, fiction, autobiographical narratives, and other materials and mediums that we typically overlook and undervalue in the social sciences? If an RCT (randomized controlled trial) was going to get us free, it would have happened by now. We know that liberation is a long-term vision making less radical reforms necessary along the way as we engage the "productive tension of holding onto a radical, real, and deep vision while engaging in the messy daily practice" to meet folks' material needs, which Davis and colleagues (2022) understand as "the (abolition) feminist praxis: the work of everyday people to try, to build, to make" (16).

Lastly, I offer wisdom from Mariame Kaba, an abolitionist organizer and writer, who encourages us to practice hope as a discipline (Kaba 2021). In an interview with The Intercept, Kaba says,

> It's less about "how you feel," and more about the practice of making a decision every day, that you're still gonna put one foot in front of the other, that you're still going to get up in the morning. And you're still going to struggle…. It's work to be hopeful. It's not like a fuzzy feeling. Like, you have to actually put in energy, time, and you have to be clear-eyed, and you have to hold fast to having a vision. It's a hard thing to maintain. But it matters to have it, to believe that it's possible, to change the world. You know, that we don't live in a predetermined, predestined world where, like, nothing we do has an impact. No, no, that's not true! Change is, in fact, constant, right? Octavia Butler teaches us. We're constantly changing. We're constantly transforming. It doesn't mean that it's necessarily good or bad. It just is. That's always the case. And so, because that's true, we have an opportunity at every moment to push in a direction that we think is actually a direction toward more justice (Intercepted 2021).

This discipline of hope can certainly inform our work, especially for those of us studying topics that are emotionally heavy and require that we serve as a witness to the horrors of sexual assault, white supremacy, state violence, and more. According to Kaba, we can understand that our work, our witness, and our commitments can "push in a direction…towards more justice." Those little pushes, even though they may seem inconsequential, are the work of abolition feminism. Corey Miles, Tulane University professor and author of *Vibe: The Sound and Feeling of Black Life in the American South*, explains this succinctly in a tweet from 2022, saying,

> Just because your work doesn't easily translate to policy recommendations does not mean it is not

extremely needed at this moment, mainly because we can't legislate ourselves our of this crisis. We need work that makes us think, feel, and dream otherwise. Find what's past policy. When folks come up to me after engaging my work & say they better understand their people who have had moments of violence and/or been locked up, I feel like what I do is worth it. Loving the people society says are incapable of it or don't deserve it is what I'm practicing at.

Conclusion

Abolition feminism brings us the promise of liberation that can orient our scholarship. I want to close with a movement call-and-response and ask that wherever you are, you sit with this call from Assata Shakur: "We have a duty to fight for our freedom. We have a duty to win. We must love and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains." It is these words that guide me, reminding me of the duty, the obligation, the costs of being a neighbor, a community member, a person existing in this world—that we must keep stayed on liberation and allow that steadfastness to guide how we move through this world.

Figure 1. This image was taken during one of nearly 100 marches our organization, Triad Abolition Project (https://www.triadabolitionproject.org/), has done in solidarity with our incarcerated siblings at the Forsyth County Detention Center. It's a picture that I also keep on a shelf in my office as a daily reminder of Assata Shakur's call for us to break our chains.

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