

Critical Conversation #1

Abolition as Study and Deconstructing Racial Capitalism

>> GARRETT: Thanks to everyone joining us from around the world. I'm Garrett Felber, I use he/they pronouns and I'm an Assistant Professor of African-American history at the University of Mississippi and one of the organizers of Study and Struggle. I'll be moderating tonight's conversation, Abolition as Study and Deconstructing Racial Capitalism, which is the first of four critical conversations this fall hosted by Haymarket Books. To see our future schedule, visit our website, studyandstruggle.com and click the webinars tab.

Study and Struggle is intended to build radical community across boundaries, whether they be national borders or prison walls. Our four-month curriculum was produced by a team of scholars, community organizers, and currently and formerly incarcerated people, including two of our panelists tonight, Rukia Lumumba, and Stephen Wilson. It centers the interrelationship between prison abolition and immigrant justice, with a particular focus on the histories and ongoing freedom struggles in Mississippi and the south. We currently have over a hundred reading groups around the world, a dozen of which are in prisons in Mississippi, and we hope these groups become radical communities unto themselves, which are connected to one another through our pen pal program and to our larger community which we -- when we come together once a month for conversations like these.

Our critical conversations will discuss the key concepts for the upcoming month and we're absolutely thrilled to have such a fantastic group of organizers tonight to launch our inaugural program.

Before I introduce the speakers, I want to thank the organizers and sponsors of this conversation, our entire Study and Struggle team, and Haymarket Books. It's critical that we support independent publishers and grass-roots organizations during this time. And you can do that in a couple of ways. First, by buying books from Haymarket and joining the Haymarket Books Club. Second, by supporting the dozen of Study and Struggle groups outside Mississippi which have indicated financial need through our Go Fund Me, which will be linked in the chat. And finally, if you're in a position to make a donation, no matter how small, be a Venmo there will be a card on the screen about how to do this and folks posting in the YouTube chat as well. All donations from tonight including the registration donation that you may have already made, will go to the Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition, which is working to decarcerate, provide support to formerly incarcerated people, and shut down prisons.

This video will be shared afterward on the Haymarket Books YouTube channel as well as our website. Please subscribe to the Haymarket channel, like this video now, and share it with as many people as possible. I also want to let everyone know about an upcoming event in the Haymarket live stream series, tomorrow night, please join us for Unforgetting, Family, My Grace, Gangs, Borders, and Revolution, with Robertio Lovato and Mike Davis. You can register and the links to sign up are being posted in the chat. A few housekeeping items. For folks who want to follow the chat, we suggest you use the top chat option rather than the live chat. If you're following along on social media tonight, please use #studyandstruggle. People who violate community guidelines will have comments deleted. We may need your patience if we have any technical issues, if your stream gets choppy it might be helpful to reduce your image quality. If our YouTube feed is interrupted for any reason, you may need to navigate back to the YouTube Haymarket books page. The feed should resume there in case of an interruption. This event will have live closed captions, to enable those, click the CC button on the bottom of the video. If you're having any trouble with the closed captions there will be a link in the chat

to the raw caption feed for Deaf and hard of hearing folks. We're incredibly grateful to have our interpreter and captioning team supporting us tonight and to HEARD for developing tonight's accessibility strategy. HEARD is an abolitionist organization that supports deaf and disabled communities impacted by the carceral system, which includes supporting the work of language justice. We have a Deaf centered model of ASL interpretation. To support the work, please see the donation link in the chat. Please post your questions in the chat and we'll get to those later in the program.

Now it's my pleasure to introduce our wonderful speakers tonight and begin our program. Rachel Herzing is the executive director of the Center for Political Education. A resource for political organizations on the left, progressive social movements, the working class, and people of color. Rachel has played roles as an organizer, activist, and advocate fighting the violence of policing and imprisonment.

Derecka Purnell is a human rights lawyer, writer, and organizer. Since graduating from Harvard Law School, she's worked to end police and prison violence nationwide by providing legal assistance, research, and trainings to community-based organizations through an abolitionist framework. Derecka is currently a columnist at The Guardian and deputy director of the Spirit of Justice Center.

Stephen Wilson is a currently incarcerated, Black queer writer, activist, and student. For over two decades, he was active in the ballroom community and worked as an HIV prevention specialist and community organizer. His work and practice inherit teachings from prison abolition, transformative and racial justice, Black feminist theory, and gender and queer liberation. Stevie is currently doing 30 days of solitary confinement as an act of retaliation by the prison. Bear with us as we patch together a combination of phone recordings and previous interviews with Stevie in response to the themes for this conversation.

It's crucial that incarcerated people be centered in conversations about abolition. So we appreciate your flexibility as we try out this format. Since this event will be transcribed and sent to all of our inside study groups, I want to take a moment to say to our incarcerated comrades, we love you, we're studying and fighting with you, and you are here with us tonight. We'll also have a slide with Stevie's address during the conversation, and I know he'd love to hear from you all, so please consider sending him a letter of support.

And last, certainly not least, Rukia Lumumba is the executive director of the People's Advocacy Institute, co-lead of the Electoral Justice Project of the Movement for Black Lives and a steering committee and cochair of the legal committee of the Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition. She was also a coproducer of the incredible Black National Convention this last weekend, which I believe is still available to watch online if you missed it. And Rukia is one of our dear comrades in Study and Struggle as well, and we're so grateful to have her with us tonight.

We'll begin this evening as we do in all of our conversations by hearing one of our -- from one of our Mississippi partners. So Rukia will start by sharing a bit about the Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition and their work in the state and we'll move to the Q and A format.

>> RUKIA: Hey, everybody. Thank you, Garrett, thank you for having me, thanks to everyone who is listening tonight who is tuning in. Sincere thanks and appreciation to all of our loved ones and all of our folks inside, our friends, our family that are inside behind cages, thank you for letting all of us out here fight with you, fight for you in this struggle. Sincere thanks. And big appreciation to the entire team at the Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition.

Again, my name is Rukia Lumumba, I am very thankful to be here tonight to share a little bit about the work we're doing here in Mississippi. Mississippi has the highest incarceration rate in the world. On December 29th, 19 -- 2019, people incarcerated inside of the penitentiary and other Mississippi Department of Correction prisons led an uprising, exposing horrific conditions and treatment inside of prisons. Weeks later the Department of Corrections -- the Department of Justice opened an investigation into this penitentiary and several other Mississippi prisons. But the COVID-19 pandemic halted the investigation. Resulting in continued abuse and neglect.

In the last six months, 59 incarcerated people have died. There have been 382 confirmed COVID cases that we know of. To make matters worse, Governor Tate Reeves of the state of Mississippi vetoed life-saving parole reform. The Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition was reactivated in January of 2020, and a resulting directly from the uprising of our folks inside. It is a group made up of incarcerated, formerly incarcerated people, families with loved ones currently incarcerated, advocacy organizations, and concerned residents demanding the state of Mississippi immediately reduce the prison population, remove harmful conditions and policies that are harming our folks on the inside, and restore humanity by closing the prison completely. Immediately we are asking that the Mississippi legislature override the governor's veto of Senate Bill 2123.

So we're asking everyone who is listening tonight to please take this call of action with us and call Mississippi state legislators and demand they override the governor's veto of Senate Bill 2123, which would have provided life-saving parole reform to many people currently incarcerated in Mississippi.

I thank you all again for this opportunity, and I look forward to continuing the conversation tonight. Thank you again, Garrett, and the entire Study and Struggle community.

>> GARRETT: Thank you, Rukia. We're going to begin our discussion portion and I'm going to have each of the panelists begin by sort of self-introducing your work through study. What role Study has played in your journey to abolition and we're going to begin with Stevie. He was able to record a clip this last weekend talking about the importance of Study for him with a comrade. So we'll start with that clip number one, John.

>> STEVIE: Alright, this is Stevie. And first I want to thank Garrett and my fellow panelists for giving me this opportunity to be a part of this event. Unfortunately I can't speak live, so I'm going to record something about study and its importance. Particularly it's importance to me, because it changed my life. I know that for me studying was a way for me to figure out what was happening in my world what had happened to my community, and it gave me a way to figure out how to change things for the better. It's something that continues for us, it's not a one time thing, it's not a one place thing. And for us here, we study with a purpose, for the transformation of ourselves, so that we can transform ourselves, our environment our relationships with other people. Study for us doesn't have to occur inside of a classroom, but it always happens collectively though. We believe that it happens collectively. You can't study just by yourself. You have to be engaged with other people, or with other texts. And so we believe that study has to be a collective thing. We also believe once again that the purpose of it is to better yourself, so that you as a person, your relationships with other people and your environment becomes better. And that's important. It's something that will also not take place inside of these prisons if we don't do it, because the department of corrections does not want us to study. The department of corrections does not want us to get better. And so if we want to do better and be better we have to study.

It is important for us to study history of people who came before us. Too often we find ourselves trying to reinvent the wheel. People have already done things and we can learn from them, but we didn't have the materials to know that, we didn't have the information to know that and so now, with the help of people outside, we have been able to get materials on what have happened in the past and what's happening today. And this knowledge empowers us. We're able to learn from past movements, past situations where people have been locked up before us, and what they have done, what they have been able to accomplish, and where they failed. And how we can attach ourselves to the work they have been doing and extend it and people come after us. Study has been a major activity for us, and has been our major vehicle of transformation, and so I think it's important for all us inside to take the time to study, to take the time to better ourselves. I want to emphasize the point that is cannot be done without the help of people beyond these walls, outside the walls, because the department of corrections, no matter whether its California, Pennsylvania, whether its South Carolina, they don't want us to study. Please stay connected to people and help us study. Thank you.

>> GARRETT: If we could start with you, Rachel, and your responses to Stevie and an introduction to your own life's work as it relates to Study and abolition.

>> RACHEL: Thank you so much for having me this afternoon. And thank you also to everybody who is participating in Study and Struggle inside and outside of prisons. I would agree with Stevie that I think Study is a very important tool, not only to kind of dealing with our own conditions, but also for us to build community with each other and I would also agree that it is best not done alone.

I direct an organization that is dedicated to working with other organizations and movements in order to use study as a tool for strengthening their work. So from that perspective, I think we would take an approach to the idea of prison industrial complex abolition which is the kind of abolition I'll be talking about tonight. We would take that approach that says that Study, that acknowledges the central role that Study plays no matter how well we do it, won't eliminate the prison industrial complex.

I'm going to say that a slightly different way, because I said it in a complicated way. No matter how good we are at studying, studying alone is not going to abolish the prison industrial complex. I think our orientation is more that study is essential to organizing for the abolition of the prison industrial complex. And we need study to organize well. So I happen to be an overeducated person who has had the benefit of lots of formal education. And I'm also someone who's benefited from very good movement education.

I'm not a fan, however, of study for its own sake. I think our best education is put in service of making change. So that change might be a change in our own conditions, we might need a GED to get a job, or we might need to be able to read to fill out a housing application, or to apply for benefits. But if we're talking about study for prison industrial complex abolition, then our study needs to be in service of fundamentally transforming the conditions that sustain surveillance, policing, sentencing, imprisonment, and execution. Our study has to be put to work. So I'm not sure what I think about the frame of study abolition as study, that didn't make a ton of sense to me. I think I might say study for abolition or study for struggle, so that we never lose track of the fact that change is our ultimate goal. And not study for the sake of study.

>> GARRETT: Thank you, Rachel. Derecka, do you want to introduce yourself and your work through your experience with study?

>> DERECKA: Sure. Sure. Thank you again for the invitation, Garrett, it's so good to see you again, even though not in the flesh. Rukia, I don't think I've seen you since I've seen Garrett in

Mississippi. It was ages ago. And Rachel, I'm so lucky the last person I saw, the last time I flew in Miami had I known that would have been the last time I would have hugged you tighter. So thank you so much, again, for the invitation.

One thing that Stevie said that stood out to me is that studying helps you become a better person, and helps you develop better relationships, and helps you develop a greater sense of yourself to the environment. So sort of this three-pronged -- this three-pronged approach to how he -- it actually reminded me of when I was in law school, and most of my organizing has been through studenting. Way back in high school, the student senate, the walkouts, all of that was so much a part of my life. And I was a student organizer through college, but it wasn't actually until law school where I started to become politicized around political education.

I hadn't heard this phrase the first phrase I heard -- place I heard it said was Robin Kelly. What's the political education starter kit? What do I need to read? And Robin said, well, I can't tell you what to read for your political education, you have to get with some people and decide what political education makes sense for your struggle. And I was like, so first you tell me that political education exists, but you're not even go tell me what to do with it? I gotta figure that out? I'm so, so, so happy that I was a part of a student movement with people who have politics much further left than mine at the time. People who were politicized through other movements, who knew that study was a part of their experiences, but the most of us were not there. Most of us were not there. If anything, we thought that our organizing demands were just the right thing. We figured we were smart enough, nice enough, we figured we were kind enough and curious enough, and our demands, they were just the right thing to do.

Why wouldn't Harvard Law School want to hire a diversity, access, and inclusion officer? Why wouldn't they want to hire more Black staff? And it wasn't until I went to south Africa and there were students who were organizing around their movement, and they were literally reading and sitting down and having plenary, and making real time decisions based on what they why reading. And I was, like, oh, I think this is what Robin may be talking about! It was the first time I was seeing study and struggle part of the same space.

So when I went back to school from that studies abroad research project, we started reading. We developed a reading list with the help of Dream Defender Act I think her name was also Rukia, but I need to double-check. We created a reading list, we read books. The first thing we read was something Robin Kelly discussed, since he inspired us to think more critically. We ended up throwing our demands away. We said, these demands are trash! It wasn't enough to be good or to be nice, or to be kind or to have ideas that made sense. We needed a political analysis. We needed to call in to question the role that Harvard was playing in society. We needed to call into question that Harvard was playing in the community of Cambridge and Boston, we needed to call into question our relationship to the institution as students, as Black students, as queer students, as students from poor and impoverished and exploited backgrounds.

Our entire analysis shifted. So it went from one team, critical theory program, to implementing our own critical race theory program. And inviting critical race theories. And we ultimately created the only space on campus where anyone could teach. It didn't matter if you were part of the dining services team, custodial worker, you were a student, if you were a clinical faculty, we created the environment that we thought that we could just convince Harvard to become. And that was so, so, so transformative to me.

So now when I talk to law students I try to say, yes, it's important you learn constitutional law, the constitution is important, that's what you're supposed to graduate law school trying to defend. But the most important thing you can do is find your people and start to cultivate a political analysis. Because what you think may be good, or make those intuitive, you've been socialized to believe that. And now you have to do the deep work of critically rethinking all of what made you possible and to do that with other people. I'll stop there.

>> GARRETT: Thank you, Derecka. Rukia, take us through your journey a bit.

>> RUKIA: So I -- first of all, I have to say thank you for this, this panel. Because honestly, Rachel, I just truly have followed your work for a very long time, and just, you are one of our guides in this movement. And just really grateful for you. And then Derecka, you know, I just love all that you're doing, and I appreciate you. And Garrett, thank you for continuing to center Mississippi, oftentimes we don't have that, so I appreciate that.

So for me, I grew up an activist, Black nationalist household. And so my parents were intentional about letting us, you negotiation learn on our own as opposed to forcing material on us. But I had a privileged experience around academia, around study in terms of just being able to and overhear conversations about particular books and about strategies, and theories, and this, that, and the third. So I recognize that, and so I come into this work having grew up in literally from in the womb, like hearing these things over and over and over again, so to some extent I don't know what it is to be without having some type of analysis around our freedom, and around abolition, and around what that kind of looks like.

And that's just my reality, but I think what always struck me was my biggest concern, and continues to be my concern, is our ability, including my own ability, to study, to recognize the struggle, and be in it, and then to act. Right? To experiment. And oftentimes for me, it's that action and that experimentation, and then continued study, like realizing it's a circular process that we have to actually experiment and continue to study at the same time. That I'm still trying to push myself to consistently do. And so that's the challenge that I often talk about with others, is how do we create origin to really lay the foundation for the transformative systems that we want to see in the future for our view of what abolition may look like in our future, if we don't just go ahead and jump out there and do it and experiment a little bit.

And so for me, the purpose of study has become the purpose of actually also experimenting. So, like, taking that journey, and so this conversation is really rich for me right now, because it is further making me challenge that notion, and really engage deeper in study, and engage deeper in study with a recommitment to engage deeper in study with our community as well here in Jackson, around how do we engage in that study in ways where everybody feels that the information is accessible. How do we do huge film screenings of books that we're reading to make it accessible for folks who aren't going to be able to sit down and read a 400-page book in a month or so? Because literally, they're tired after getting off work. Or for a myriad of other reasons. Literacy, right, in Mississippi, illiteracy in Mississippi is super high. How do we actually decrease that and do something like Cuba did with the literacy project? How do we begin to make it more accessible for our folks? I'm going off into a tangent, so I'm going to slow down and stop now, but for me the study piece is about sharing that study process with community, making it more accessible and experimentation. Thank you.

>> GARRETT: Thank you, Rukia. So I think we're going to hear another clip from Stevie that I think speaks a little bit to Derecka's point about kind of wanting the desire when you hear about political education for a blueprint, so Stevie is going to lay out some of the different groups that he participates in inside, and this is from an interview that he did on abolitionist study with Rust Belt Abolition Radio in

Michigan. I want to give them a shout out for letting us use this clip. I'd love to hear from all of you a little bit about some of the nitty gritty of how you've structured study groups, not just what you read, but how were you in community, what were the ways that you sort of got to these issues of access, of building community through study? So we'll listen to that clip first. And this is clip number two, John.

>>STEVIE VIDEO:

Interviewer: So tell us a little more about the abolitionist study group you run and how you do what you do?

STEVIE: First of all, it's called 9971, obviously a reference to Attica and it's a general abolitionist study group. We started reading things like *Are Prisons Obsolete* by Angela Davis. And what we do is we do a chapter reading and then we come back and we have discussion questions. We focus a lot on definitions because this is the first time many people are hearing about abolition. You know when we say "a world without prisons" they think we're crazy. People immediately take their minds to: "What are you going to do about the murderers and the rapists?" And things like that and so we had to really talk about basic definitions, things like safety, and community and things like that. So that was a larger group, and it was more generalized.

We also had had a group called Circle Up, which is a transformative justice group. Most of the men were under the age of 25, about 23 young men, it was one of the programs focused on transformative justice and how we apply it inside, to our families and communities. "Sass" was the prayer abolitionist group we started because it was sometimes kind of hard to talk about those kind of issues and 9971. So we had a group that would talk about *Captive Genders* and queer injustice and works like this from an abolitionist perspective. And we also had Bold Type Books book club, which ten prisoners were involved in, A Bold Type Books which used to be Nation Books would send in a book each month with some discussion questions and we would meet—it's just like a book club. That has been taken over by Haymarket Books now. So here at Fayette we're going to be doing it and Haymarket Books will be providing the books for us. So we're happy to have that program continue.

>> GARRETT: So Rachel, we'll start back with you again. I just returning to this question about how you structure study through the Center for Political Education, and maybe if you would speak to also the -- something you touched upon in your previous remarks about how this isn't -- we're not talking about neutral study, we're talking about something that's used to build power. How do we use study as a way to build power?

>> RACHEL: I think a lot of what Stevie laid out in his response are also things that I've experienced over my time in organizations, doing political education, but also that we use at the Center for Political Education as well. Developing shared language I think is really, really crucial. And that's not to tell everybody that you have to speak exactly the same way, but I do think that it matters that there's a shared understanding of what we're getting at.

And that also there's an acknowledgment that the language that we use has power, but also can do certain kinds of work. So as one little example of that, Derecka has been abused by me around, I want everybody to stop using the word "officer" in reference to COs and in reference to cops. They do not deserve that kind of deference. So do not call them an officer. But to understand the political nature of

that language. Or to understand that everything is not everything when it comes to abolitions, but there are very specific kinds of politics that that entails. I appreciate Stevie raising that.

I want to come back to something that Rukia mentioned that I think is really, really important, I was grateful you brought it up, Rukia, which is experimentation. If we are developing a practice, if we're studying and then applying and studying, and applying, our practice gets better, but also our analysis gets better. And moving back and forth I think and understanding that what we learn is only as useful as what we are able to make it do. And that what we do has to be informed by an understanding of what's possible. And I don't mean what the state tells us is possible, but I mean developing a hypothesis about the conditions that we're living under, and where we want to go. And having that inform rather than as Derecka was saying, we're just good kids with good ideas.

So we do study at the Center for Political Education in a bunch of different ways. We do some formal study groups, like read a thing, discuss it, watch a thing, discuss it. We do some classes, where like Derecka recently came to a class we held where there's a curriculum, and we spend time trying to go over core concepts, and we have guest speakers. We also do things that are a little different, so we'll show films, or we'll have -- bring together organizations to be in strategic conversation together. And to my mind, those conversations are also places where political education happens. Because we're having to articulate what we think, we're hearing from others, hopefully we're engaging in a principle struggle and that makes us fight smarter, I think. Which to my mind is the goal. I want everybody to get more of what we want and need, and so we need to fight as smart as possible to be able to do that.

The last thing I think I'll say about that is that I think there's a way that -- I don't know, back and forth study that I've done with people inside also, has been through maybe correspondence, or maybe through phone calls, or something like that. And some of that has been, you know, we read something together and with discuss it, some of the way that Stevie was describing. But also just -- I think this thing, tell me what you think about that. And I do think that having conversations with people, with whom you are either already politically engaged or you'd like to be politically engaged, goes a very, very long way for some of the reasons I was talking about before. So I'll leave it there.

That might not be quite as nitty gritty as you hoped, but I bet Rukia and Derecka both have good things to say about that too.

>> GARRETT: All right, Derecka, you have to get nittier and grittier, then. It's on you.

>> DERECKA: Nittier and grittier. Okay, I'm wearing my emancipation project T-shirt. When I got out of law school I became a political education zealot. I said, everyone has to know about this political education thing, we have to take this show on the road. So my supervisor then, who is good friends with Rachel, he said, okay, this is your first shot out of law school, what's the plan? What is it that you want to take on? And I said, political education. We have to do political education. The justice project to make sure that we have an analysis. And he was like, what? It was so, so funny.

But over time I'm so grateful that he gave me space to do that, not only at the project, but with my partner. So I'm born and raised in St. Louis, I'm from St. Louis, I consider it my hometown, I'm very proud of it. And I had a chance through the advancement project to go back to St. Louis to work with organizers there and through Action St. Louis, around BIPOC, and with the Ferguson Collaborative. On the Department of Justice consent decree with the Ferguson Police Department. One of the first things that we did was political education. Because if we're going to work towards building a campaign, the number one question, how do we know that this -- where is our political commitment, where are our principles, what is our shared vocabulary?

So when I started talking about abolition, and everybody was like, whoa, whoa, pump the brakes! What are you talking about? Oh, yeah, we probably should read and talk to some people. So one of the first things we did in Ferguson was read a book about policing. And so we were trying to figure out, okay, if we're going to have a consent decree, whose primary purpose is going to attempt to improve the police department, and the people in this room, the organizers in this room have a spectrum of what they believe are about policing, you have people who want community policing, whatever that means, and you have people who are abolitionists.

So how do we start developing an analysis to figure out how to approach this descent -- consent decree? Ultimately we decided to focus on parts of the decree, parts of the consent decree that removed harm from people who lived in Ferguson. So we focused on getting cases dismissed, for example, we focused on having fewer interactions between police officers and civilians, we focused on giving feedback on the use of force policies within the police departments to increase the number of touches that they could not do when they came into the police counter. So we started using -- we started to mold and shape our analysis around the institution of policing, and then that helped form our organizing.

The very first political education conversation that we had was around abolition. And it was because people who were a part of the campaign really loved and just had such a special place in our heart for the work that Access St. Louis was doing, but weren't quite convinced that we could close a jail. So the first session that we did was what about the murderers, what about the rapists? And we put scenarios all across the wall, and we walked through each one of those scenarios. And then not only did we ask questions like, what about the murderers and what about the rapists, I asked people in the room, why do people kill people? Why do people kill people? Because what about the murderers doesn't even get to the heart often what people are afraid of.

So then we came up with this grand list of why people kill people. And then we talked about ways to prevent that and ways to respond after it happened. And so from that campaign having a group of people who were half skeptical about the project of abolition, half curious, to them being on the fully fledged abolition campaign that ultimately closed the jail, it felt like one of the most exciting things I have ever happened to me, probably anyone in that organization. And so there was a lot of debate, a lot of confusion initially, a lot of concern about safety, and about whether this was feasible, was it possible, and now that jail is closed, because of political education, because of experimentation, because people who were formerly incarcerated there, and people who were committed to its destruction did all of that to make sure it closed down.

So I hope it's nitty and gritty enough. I think that's the nittiest -- there's no real drama, but hopefully that helps.

>> GARRETT: Go ahead, that was great. Thank you so much, Derecka

>> RUKIA: That was great. Thank you. It actually made me think of the work that we're doing, because we really want to see Parchman Prison close down. And with the Mississippi prison reform coalition, that's our goal, and to attack all the other prisons. But I think the process that Derecka talked about is really important. And when we look at the demand for Parchman to close, it comes from a similar process of folks inside and folks outside studying the history of Parchman. And understanding its existence as a place of torture and abuse for Black people since its inception.

So Parchman Prison is an 18,000-acre plantation in Mississippi, similar to Angola Prison in Louisiana, which is also an 18,000-acre plantation. But Parchman, before reconstruction, served as a plantation. It served as a place, an institution of slavery. Immediately after reconstruction it was turned

into a workhouse and a prison. And it has existed as a prison ever since. The last time -- in studying Parchman, really a lot of our study has come from guidance from folks inside, looking at the space that we used to -- we used to have our meetings, our regular meetings around public safety inside of the cofold building here in Mississippi, which is a building that was erected to honor the coalition of civil rights groups that came together to really create some serious change in Mississippi.

So we used to meet in there, and inside there are these murals that honor the work that happened in the past, so one of the first murals that you see is this mural of Parchman Prison. And it's a mural that shows an article that indicates how young folks, primarily were incarcerated in Parchman Prison, and suffered a lot of the similar abuses that folks are current currently experiencing right now inside of Parchman Prison, and other Mississippi prisons right now. And they were incarcerated because of their protests in the 1960s and '70s. And we're talking about abuses of not being allowed to shower. Abuses of not being provided food. Abuses of not having drinkable water. And not being given drinkable water. Abuses of sewage existing inside of the cage, inside of their cell. Conditions of denial of medical treatment. Understaffing and unqualified staff, right?

These are literally exactly the same conditions of abuse that folks are currently expressing inside of Parchman. And are being retaliated against. Similar to our brother Stevie who has been retaliated against for speaking out right now. And so I think when talking about the intricacies of study, getting into the weeds of it is that studying our experiences is also very important. And having those real conversations that Rachel talked about is critical as well. Because I think that exposes a lot sometimes.

Last story I'll share too is the importance of allowing study to also be centered in people who are directly impacted by the harm we're trying to cure. One of the things I learned throughout my time in Mississippi is oftentimes as advocates we think we know the answer, because we know where we want to go. Right? But what are the experiences, when we stop and just listen, when we really just stop and listen to what people are saying they want, we actually began to realize that how we get to our NorthStar is not exactly the same way as that -- as we envision. Because our people may not be right where we are at that time.

So, for example, we always give this example when talking about community-led governance, which I think is directly tied to abolition, right? Because it's -- we can talk about that another time. But when we -- when I think about this, this is -- here in Jackson we talk about potholes. Anybody comes to Jackson you know we got potholes. And when my father became mayor, he used the people's assembly format, my father was the late mayor of Jackson, Mississippi, revolutionary human rights attorney, amazing human being, dedicated his life to all of the work that we're all doing right now. He -- when creating his platform, actually to run for mayor, he had a people's assembly. And in the assembly folks were like, yeah, yeah, yeah, man, you keep talking about this liberation, this freedom, this self-determination. But to be honest, I'm just concerned about my ability to get to work, because every time I ride down the road I hit a pothole. And when I hit that pothole, it breaks my rim. And now I got to get my rim fixed and I got to get a new tire and now I'm late for work. And now -- some folks literally are now unemployed because they didn't get to work.

And so we began to realize that we can't just move rapidly past the existing complexities that are causing the problems in the first place that are preventing us from living our best lives, right? And so when we're talking about study, we got to talk about study deeply, about our own experiences, and how we actually also use those experiences to chart the course for our journey towards abolition and our

freedom. And so I hope that makes sense and was clear, and if not, ask me a follow-up question. I'm sorry.

>> GARRETT: No, that's great. I love that story. And I think that's really actually segues us to the next clip from Stevie, because one of the things that he talks about a lot is translation, and in a letter to me recently he wrote something that I thought was really heartbreaking, because we've talked a lot about translation, and he said to me, you know, I don't actually like doing the work of translation inside. It's something I do out of necessity. He was talking about taking texts and breaking them down. And he said, I do that because the people inside are written about, and they can't access the way that they're being written about.

And so he talks in this clip a little bit about the importance of translation, of accessibility of study, and the other thing he talks about is this idea of abolition as practice. Not as a place that we're sort of working to, but something that is ongoing and in process. So we'll play that clip and then you can sort of pick either of those questions of translation and accessibility or of abolitionist presence or practice. This is clip number three, John.

>>>STEVIE: Well, what I'm trying to say to people when I say abolition, and this is why I asked that question because, I want them to understand that abolition is not something that's always in the future, I'm just saying in general if someone, a white, wealthy person breaks the law, what are the chances this person is put into prison? It's not going to happen. Say this guy has a substance abuse problem, he's 21 years old, he's white, lives in the suburbs, has a substance abuse problem, he breaks into his neighbor's house, burglarizes the house, police get called, he gets locked up, is he going to keep getting locked up? No they're probably going to send him to some ya know, drug treatment place. That's what's going to happen. That's abolition. That's abolition. Instead of locking him up, treat that. You see, and that is abolition also. So I'm trying to explain to people that the solution isn't always the police, or always a jail or prison, there are other ways we deal with harm. And so when I explain it that way to them, they see "oh wait, it's here. Abolition is here now." It's just that not everyone gets a chance to be a part of that process. How can we open it up to everybody? How can we open it up—the person is getting high and then committing crime to get high, then we don't need to lock that person up, that's not the issue. We don't need to call the police and lock them up. Maybe we need to get them help for their substance abuse problem. And that's abolition. My task in here a lot of times is actually translating the work for the people in here. And that's one of the areas I don't think we're doing too well in. I don't think we're doing too well in that area. Stuff that's being published, I don't think is actually accessible to a lot of people behind the walls.

>> GARRETT: Okay, great. I'm just going to throw a curveball and start with Derecka so Rachel doesn't always have to respond immediately.

>> DERECKA: Can you give me the question? I'm not even on the field. What's the question?

>> GARRETT: We just -- that's the curveball. No. Either this question of what is abolitionist practice look like, so for people who maybe are new to abolition and think about it as this utopian location that we're working towards, how do we see abolition as something that we do in our daily lives, or this question about translation, how do we make study accessible and why does it matter who we study with, not just what we study.

>> DERECKA: Wow. Okay. Okay. Translation or as practice. I'll try the translation part. I'll attempt it. Because I try to think of myself as a writer, and sometimes I get things wrong and things are lost in translation a lot. One thing I really wish I had not written and the piece I wrote for the Atlantic called "How I Became an Abolitionist" was this part where I talk about when I first heard the word "abolition," it felt quite utopic. Ever since then I've been reading more about utopia, socialist utopia, and I reread "Freedom Dream" and I wasn't trying to be critical of utopia, we need utopias, we need to think and dream and imagine new ways of being. And I shouldn't have been as -- I wasn't intentionally being dismissive when I wrote that, I was trying to speak to a way that a lot of people also feel similarly about abolition when they first hear it, without understanding the importance of utopias.

The same way people dismiss anarchy right now, oh, anarchy, without grappling with the politics of what it is. So I just -- I don't want to give utopia a bad rep, because we need it so much to help and guide our work. So I think that translation is important. One thing that came up in Stevie's comments that is -- I am excited, it's a debate within the abolitionist community. I don't know which community it is, but it's a debate I'm hearing right now, and I am thinking out how to think about it. It's what abolition is and what abolition is not.

So there's this piece that came out sometime this summer critiquing the idea of abolitionist is the suburbs, and to hear Stevie say abolition is someone in the suburbs getting treatment and not going to jail. And then thinking about the new book that's critical of mandatory treatment for people who need help. So there are all these conversations and disagreements happening among abolitionists, people who study the politics. And I think that's really exciting. Because so often the conversation is are you a reformer, are you an abolitionist, are you super, super woke TM or are you trying to undermine the system and support the Man?

I'm actually more excited about in terms of the translation, are the strands of disagreement and discourse and debate that's happening among the politics. Community policing is another one. There are people who consider themselves to be abolitionist who are -- not community policing. Community control of police, which is not community policing. I saw Rukia's face. No, no. Just in case, just in case, no. Not that. There's a debate happening were whether be community control of police is abolitionist. I believe there was a paper that actually I still need to read saying no, it's not abolitionist.

So these debates about the future that we're trying to build, the future that exists right now, I think that's really exciting. One thing I say to the community control of police as abolitionists is there are already communities in control of police. There are lots of communities in control of police right now. And if you say, well, those are just white communities, you can go to any of the countries in Latin America, you can go to a lot of the countries in Africa, there are systems of oppression that fall along racial lines. So it's not as simple as we just need people of color to be in charge of police in order to establish the institution.

So I am excited about those that things that have been happening. I feel I'm not exactly answering your question, but that's what I'm excited to share listening to Stevie and thinking about what excites me about the conversation. And I hope that people continue to disagree and to push, because the other side of political education is not that we're all agreeing, right, there was a class I took this summer with the people's forum and I took it with Dream Defenders, the Afro socialist and femme power, one thing the instructor said is we are here to build conceptual alignment as organizers. That's what we're here to do. They didn't mean agreement. It didn't mean we all had to think the same thing. It's that we need to build

conceptual alignment so as our movements build power, we understand where we're coming from and how to relate to each other's organizations.

So part of that political education, especially around abolition, but for so many other areas of struggle and political ideology is the need for conceptual alignment and not total agreement. And I'm happy that people are taking principle disagreement stances and saying, no. They're laying claim to contest it. So I'm excited about that.

>> GARRETT: We're going to take -- I'm going to take a brief five seconds for the translation team to catch up. And now Rukia, I want to hear what you have to say about this.

>> RUKIA: Absolutely. Also just look at our translation team, I want to make sure they're ready for us. Yeah. I mean, thank you, Derecka, because I just -- I'm going to answer your question but I also want to agree with Derecka around you negotiation having police of color, having Black police, does not mean it's better policing. Or having police that come from your community does not mean that the system of policing is now better.

We can look even at Jackson, Mississippi, we are an 85% Black city, with over 90% of the police force is Black. And we still have police violence, right? So the system of policing itself is something that we're looking at. It's not about if the faces are Black or white, or brown, or red. It's about a system that is actually inherently infective and does not protect our communities. So just thank you, Derecka.

And similar to the whole conversation around correctional officers and the system of prisons. Rachel mentioned earlier, we need to stop giving them the power of calling them officers, and I do want to know, Rachel, what do you suggest we call them? Because I do want to stop giving them the leadership of calling them officers, and I do want to call them something else. My mentor over here Denise Coleman, who has spent 38 years in prison, who recently got out two years ago, she calls them police. Sometimes I just get confused if she's talking about the police outside or the police inside. But she definitely calls them police. And so I don't know if that -- maybe that's the term we should be using. I'm really open to learning and using the right terminology, because I think that's important.

One of the things Stevie mentioned in his talk was this idea around giving examples of what abolition is. And so like the example of someone getting drug treatment instead of going to a prison is a form of abolition. For me, I really appreciated that comment, because I think that it's both translation and practice to some extent, and maybe I'm not answering the question right. But for me, it -- because a lot of my work is literally just organizing community around the idea of something different that we're currently experiencing and providing those resources to help them make that a reality, is being able to help folks understand the words I'm using, so that we have similar definitions and vision.

And so as much as it's true in the debate community around abolition, which oftentimes is made up of a lot of advocates who have been studying for a long time, the terminology and definition of terminology and accessibility of terminology is just as important in terms of our day-to-day organizing with folks. So I think the way Stevie approached define thing abolition for me was really helpful, because it gave me another way to explore how do I express the work of abolition. Because it's true, it is creating something different that is not based on punishment.

And so I'm not really answering the question and I'm kind of all in my thoughts about it as I'm talking. But I just want to hold on to that, because I do think that was an important comment. And Rachel will probably really answer the question for you. I'm throwing it to Rachel.

>> RACHEL: Empty promises is what I would call that. So I'll start by saying answering your question, Rukia, which is not -- it's just what I say. And I think there are lots and lots of ways of

transforming our language. So we don't all have to use different language, but the point for me is that it's important that we're mindful of whose language we're using and toward what end. So I say guards and cops to make the distinction between people who police cages and people who police people outside of cages.

And -- but I think police works in both of those situations too. Some people like other kinds of things. That aren't even as genteel as guards and cops. But the point there I think is more about kind of what power, what deference are we giving them, whose language are we using there.

I don't ever think calling anything correctional is appropriate. So that's a good reason to strike that one out. The same way that I don't think it's appropriate to call people offenders. So again, it's like not to censure everybody, but to put, you know, put a bug in your ear around, can we be more thoughtful about how we're communicating as part of our political study, but also as part of our political practice.

So maybe I'll talk more about practice. I've found myself having a similar reaction to Derecka in terms of Stevie's example. And I wish he were here, because I would love to be more engaged with him and to hear more about that idea. But I appreciate kind of where Rukia took that, because I do think that that example is -- it kind of takes us through translation into practice. And I think now is an interesting period to be thinking about those kinds of examples, like what do we mean when we say alternatives imprisonment, for instance.

Because we're also in a period where we're being pressed to think about alternatives to the kinds of things that we use currently police for. And we know that all different things are not equal, and we know that they're not all good. So, for instance, just putting somebody in coercive treatment that's locked down, it might be treatment, but it's still -- if it's lockdown, it's still lockdown. Even if it's not lockdown, if it's coercive, it doesn't do the work, the abolitionist work that we hope life-affirming projects and services will do. Which is to help people make the kinds of transitions that they want to make to shift the kinds of conditions that lead people to engage in behavior that some might call antisocial or some might call criminal or the stuff Derecka was getting at earlier.

I would always rather see people who are seeking treatment get treatment rather than life in a cage. But I also want that treatment to not be debasing or to not be physically harmful to them, or to not -- I want it to be affirming and I want it to be based on the kinds of goals that they set for themselves and they set for their loved ones. And I think that's really what abolition is about. I think it's very popular these days to talk about abolition as an affirmative politics, and I agree that it is, I never want to lose sight of the fact that my ultimate goal is the elimination of the prison industrial complex. But at the same time, it is not only a negative politic. I think it is an affirmative politic. It's about how are we also creating the kinds of conditions that we want? That are important for us to have not just life, but beautiful, healthy, fulfilling life.

That is impossible under the current conditions where we use the prison industrial complex as a response for everything, from a cat in a tree, to crisis of homelessness, for instance. So the practice of that to my mind is really about that experimentation to come back to experimentation, and for us to also be gracious with -- enough with each other to allow us time and space to experiment and maybe even to fail at our experiment, but to try again and not just say, well, abolition is a failed project, because they couldn't get it right a hundred percent the first time.

And that practice I think is showing up and saying, this is what we actually want this, is what we think we need to be able to live well with each other and in right relation to the natural world. And we need time and space and knowledge to test that out. And so in the treatment example, what does life-

affirming self-determined treatment that builds people's capacity to live well in relationship to other people in the natural world look like? Or what does -- I don't know, traffic direction that's not led by an armed agent of the state look like? So I think there are lots of different ways that we can practice that. If I can say one more thing, I'm sorry to go on, but one other thing just popped into my brain that I think is another one of my little hobby horses.

I also think that the -- how to say it? That our abolitionist politics need to be aimed at changing all of our conditions. So I'm not particularly interested in kind of like everyday abolition, like I didn't punish my kids, so I'm an abolitionist because of this thing that I just said earlier. Which is about the ultimate goal of eliminating the prison industrial complex. So if your act of not punishing your kids is attached to some bigger practice you're trying to build with parents, kind of across your family, or across your neighborhood, or whatever that might be, to shift how your kids understand the nature of punishment, that's a very different thing than I just did this one thing in my house hold, so now I'm good to go, call me an abolitionist. Or I made a victory garden in my back yard, and now we have a lot of pickles or something.

There's lots of different kinds of things that people are attributing abolitionist politics to, and I'm not trying to censor what people do or police what people do. But my question about that is, what are we building? What is the practice that we are developing such that we are absolutely able to eliminate the use of surveillance policing, imprisonment, sentencing, and execution? And what do we need to do, what kind of skills to do we need to build over time, what relationships, what infrastructure do we need, and to my mind all of the things together are the practice of doing abolitionist politics.

>> GARRETT: Thank you so much for that, Rachel. I think that was great. I'm going to -- we're getting a little tight on time and I want to make sure we have time for Q and A. I'm going to move to a piece that Stevie recorded in June, in response to the uprisings. And Rachel you wrote a powerful piece this summer, Political Education in a Time of Rebellion I thought was really timely and you wrote political education isn't just education about politics, it's education for the specific purpose of making our politics more powerful. It is front line work. And I thought that was a really wonderful encapsulation of the relationship between study and struggle in that moment.

So we're going to play clip number five, which is this recording of Stevie talking about I think the promise of this historical moment of uprisings, as well as some fears, and he'll touch a little bit upon what you just did about everyone is an abolitionist now, and then we'll let you all have closing statements.

>>> STEVIE: It's a lot, and I think to myself you know has he done any research? And I was thinking about Dylan Rodriguez and Dylan talks a lot about how so many people today, particularly students are claiming abolition even though the politics of what they are calling for are not abolitionist. They are anti police reform or some type of progressive incarceration where the deserving get out of prison while the others gotta stay there because they're really bad guys. And we find out that a lot people think they're at the point of abolition but they're really not. The task is teaching them what abolition really is. And at the end he says, you know you have to really be willing to stand up and say I'm an abolitionist and say that to Sojourner Truth's ghost. Can you really stand in front of them, the people who have laid down their lives for this and done this and say, "I'm an abolitionist." Can you really look at them and say that? You know what I mean, what you're calling for? It's amazing to me, it's amazing.

It only takes a little bit of time for people to research. And I hope that, I ask you guys and I asked people in Chicago also to give Mariame Kaba's piece so that we would understand here's someone who we know is an abolitionist, and respected and known to the movement and these are the things that we

should not be supporting. And here we have somebody else coming and saying this is what we want. Come on, who we gonna listen to, Mariame or this guy? You know, who's this guy? It's just amazing to me, and our biggest threats right now are people coming into the movement and trying to co-opt it for their own personal reasons. Our biggest threat right now is people coming in and trying to redirect the energy toward nonreform reforms. People want something different right now. We make sure that they get something different. They want change. We need to make sure we make real change. And not just some other added measure to train police so that they don't be as racist today, that's not gonna work.

The police are on the defensive, which is amazing to me, because that's what we've been trying to do for a long time is shift the narrative that they don't create safety, they create harm. And people are seeing that this narrative is playing out all over the place now. And I just think we need to seize upon this also because when we start talking about historically what are the role of police, right? Because the thing is, people talk about, okay we got defunding police is cool but think about policing period. When we think about what policing is period, we're seeing that we have to get rid of it. That's the only real solution. Okay? So I think that when we start talking about policing and opening up a conversation about what people are saying, you know, what is their role? What is it they really do? And get people to understand that we don't need them, we can keep each other safe. Okay? We can keep each other safe.

That's the thing that vexes me a little bit. I see all this energy, and it's great, and actually this thing is going further than I thought it would right now. My major concern is that we don't allow this to turn into a call to nonreform reforms. Ya know, take this energy and turn it—people will be so disappointed. Ya know, they're coming out every night, they're coming out every day and they're protesting, and they're expecting some change and ya know—all we get is “they're going through more training. We'll get more body cams” No. People want real deep systemic change. And we have to keep pressing for that. We really do.

And also, we need to connect what's happening out in these streets with what's happening inside these prisons. You know? Because if they're doing that out there with cameras and all that stuff, imagine what they're doing in here. You know, they're terrorizing us, they control us. They put us in a position of being subhuman and dehumanizing us. And so we need to understand that happens there here. And I don't think people are going to end up behaving, if you've been treated like this for ten years, and they let you our into the world, what do you think that person is going to behave like? You know? They don't understand that.

It's a complex situation right now. And being in here and watching it I'm full of hope, full of hope that things will change. But at the same time I'm concerned that this energy doesn't get dissipated into some crazy non-change changes. You know, I don't want to see that happen. Why not talk about policing period? Let's take it one step further. You're talking about taking a billion dollars away from their budget. Well let's talk about the role of policing, period. See? And we haven't really got to that conversation. Cuz you see they got this thing police brutality, but police is always going to be brutal. It's violent work. There's not such thing as nonviolent policing. You know what I mean? We have to talk about what is that they do? Not just well police doing this, but what is that they do? What is the role of police in our society? And we gotta start questioning that—do we need this? And who wants it? Know what I mean? And that's important, it's really important.

>> GARRETT: I think we'll go to each of you just for some final words before we get -- we have about four questions in the Q and A. But really just on this question of how you assess this current moment where we are, the importance of study in that moment, and, yeah, I think we'll go back to our original --

>> 30 seconds.

>> GARRETT: So we'll end with some time for closing comments from each of you about sort of to Stevie's point, where do you see us in this current moment in terms of both promise and possible pitfalls and the importance of study in this current moment of uprisings. And then we'll move to our Q and A. We'll start with you, Rachel.

>> RACHEL: All right. I'm in a really hopeful place right now in terms of the movement for the abolition of the prison industrial complex. I think there's a lot out there right now around which we should be pessimistic, and that's really hard, and that people are struggling with. But I think the openings that we have right now to be able to try some different things out, which is all I mean when I'm talking about experiments, is the ability to try something new out that we haven't been given time to do before.

And that there's more of an appetite for us to do this trying out than there may have been previously. And that might just be my old tired behind, you know, thinking about the 1990s and what things were like then, or whatever. But I do think there are some openings. I'm not naive, I think, about where we are and how much we're up against. But I do think that we need to take as much advantage of the windows that we have right now and try a bunch of stuff out. Try as much stuff out as possible.

I take Stevie's point around who we pay attention to, and I think that that's actually one of the primary roles of study of rigorous study, is also to understand who do we trust? Whose kind of ideas and theories and analysis and experience do we trust? And I happen to trust Miriam Cabba, I don't know who that other guy is Stevie was referencing. I also don't want us to get too caught up on -- and I'm not suggesting Stevie was saying this, but I don't want us to get too caught up on having to be right or having to -- only have a handful of people be the trusted messengers. I think there's room if we are going to build the kind of mass that we need to build to actually have some power, there's room for more of us to get in the boat.

And I guess I would just ask you if you're interested in getting in the boat, please come correct, please do the work to understand what the politics are. Please do the work to get out of your comfort zone. So if community oversight is your jam, and people are repeatedly telling you they don't think that we can eliminate police with community oversight, can you think beyond that? If you really have this goal? But I do think that there's room for many more of us, and I want our movement to be as vibrant and as exciting and as welcoming as it can be. I steal from Tony all the time, but I'm going to say it again because I think it's important -- we need to make our politics irresistible. And that is not meant to be a slogan or catch phrase or something. That's meant to be our practice. How do we make this the place people want to be? That's where I think we're at right now. And where we need to be.

>> GARRETT: Derecka, do you want to follow that? I shouldn't have posed it that way. Derecka, would you follow that?

>> DERECKA: I will try. I will try. When Stevie was talking about meeting kids who were claiming to be abolitionists, and abolitionist -- it actually made me think of Christianity and the type of people I mean who call themselves Christians or the type of churches who I hear call themselves Christians is always interesting because it's like, that's not really what -- I don't think real Christians, but I don't take a lot of their word, the fruits of their labor to be Christlike.

I wish people had a similar orientation around abolition, because that would be a lot easier. But as someone who is living among those spaces, it remind me so much of it, so I feel like I'm used to having to contest the term and the politics, because of all the practice I've had to do identifying as a Christian. But what's exciting about contesting those terms is that for lots of people I'm the only person who is a Christian abolitionist who is anticapitalist that they know. So when they have someone come up in the church who is talking about, we need more Black police officers, I can say no, no, Jesus is anti-police. So it gives us new terrain to weigh these conversations and. And I hope as more people become abolitionist, people who grapple and say the politics continue to push back and to contest the term.

I can't -- what book was I reading, I can't remember the name of the book right now, but it was -- maybe how capitalism underdevelops America. He had this program, not a 10-point program, but he has a list of thoughts at the end of this book and one of the thoughts says, we don't need to make a bunch of people socialists. We need to make a lot of people excited or -- we need to make socialism popular. And so I hear part of what Rachel was saying about abolition. I don't know if our project is to evangelize the masses and have a bunch of abolitionist converts, but maybe it could be to popularize and make the politics I resistible. That's something that's maybe easier than getting to one-on-one arguments with people about whether they are specifically abolitionists. I think that can be important.

I think what's more exciting is that 54% of Americans surveyed said that the police precinct in Minnesota was rightfully burned down after George Floyd's death. Do I think those 54% of people are abolitionists? No. Do I think those people believe we should defund the police? No. But I do -- do I think them being excited about a police precinct burning down means something for abolition? Absolutely. So how do we take these societal moments where abolition is popular and push the politics further to the left, rather than just being so concerned about in one-on-one conversations whether someone is an abolitionist or a Christian or a socialist? If that person is doing harmful things, they have to be caught in or called out, whatever movement people are using these days, because I can't keep up how we're calling it. I think that's important. So I think the conversation is important. But I'm much more excited about the politics becoming popular rather than just the individuals.

>> GARRETT: I couldn't unmute myself. I was trying to say, Rukia, you're up.

>> RUKIA: Thank you. You know, I think Rachel and Derecka really laid out the foundation for what I'm going to say, that I think when we continue to talk about study and struggle, and abolition, that one thing that stuck with me that Stevie said is that we keep us safe. And it's this concept and this understanding, this deep understanding that I think most folks have, I could be wrong, but I believe most folks have, at least most folks I've talked to, even if they believe in police, they also believe that we keep us safe.

And I think that that is true even inside of the carceral system. It's not the guards inside that protect folks. It's other folks who are incarcerated that protect each other. And when we're out here in the community, we keep us safe. We create the systems of accountability that we need to see and to prevent harm from happening in the first place. As we continue to engage and study, I want us to study how we have kept us safe in the past, and to really engage in those deep conversations that Rachel talked about earlier that is a part of our political education and our study to figure out how we begin to create new ideas in new ways to experiment what safety looks like when we're in control of it as community. So that's what I'll leave us on, is this idea that we keep us safe.

>> GARRETT: Thank you, Rukia. So we have a lot of questions, not a lot of time. My strategy here is I'm going to read a couple of these that I feel like touch on new areas, and then just let you in the same format choose which one you want to respond to.

Have any of you studied something that was so overwhelming that you felt incapable of action? And how did you overcome that experience? Another one is, how do you respond to people who don't see lived experience as a credible form of knowledge or value?

And the last one is, a bit longer. The disability community often expresses fear over being left behind by abolitionists, of desire for independent living, not being centered as it should be rather than, quote, being taken care of. As a disabled person than myself, I struggle to articulate the difference between community care and being taken care of to other disabled folks. So do any of the speakers have ideas for language and phrasing that would help with that? Rachel, you can feel free to take any of those.

>> RACHEL: All right. Those are really interesting questions. All of them. I think I will start with overwhelm. Which is to say, yes, the answer to that question is yes. I have studied things that have felt overwhelming to me. And -- some of the things that I think are the most important to my political development I've seen -- have seen overwhelming to me.

Understanding history of race and racism. I did formal study on that that got me so overwhelmed there was some days I couldn't get out of bed. I think learning about capitalism is overwhelming. And I think understanding each of those things and their relationship to each other, but I'll take them separately, is essential to the politics that I have, but also to me being able to live the kind of life that I want to live. So if I'm committed to living in a way that is not completely under the boot of some white oppressor, then I need to understand those things. And that's I think the same with learning about, and this isn't book study, but this is kind of the day-to-day conversation that we've been talking about as a totally legitimate way to learn, learning about the conditions that people are living under in prisons across the United States, and being in communication with imprisoned people in many states as I was for years and years. That is totally overwhelming and makes you not want to act. And I think kind of political commitment is what keeps me going.

And I think to Derecka's point, we develop that political commitment, right, most of us don't have the luxury, luxury of -- the good fortune, maybe I'll say, of growing up in the Lumumba family, out the womb, into radicalism, most of us need to develop that. And I think having that kind of -- I'm not going to say north star, because I feel that's getting overused and I want to save that for good stuff, but having that kind of pull, that kind of really deep pull to want to transform our conditions, helps me stay committed and also I think helps me understand that I need to do the work that helps me stay committed. And what that means in my case, people learn differently, so I'm not sure what works for everyone, but in my case, what that means is breaking things into chunks.

That means not trying to understand the entire history of capitalism, overnight or through one class. Or I'm just going to sit down and read capital by myself. For instance. Which I hear lots of people do. I want to understand capitalism, so I'm going to read capital. But understanding I think chunk by chunk and to give yourself some patience with that too, I think, to understand, okay, these are building blocks, I'm going to have to figure out how to put them together in a way that helps me understand the bigger thing, gives you something to move through and gives you something to grow into.

The same with racism as I was talking about before. So I don't need to read every single terrible thing that was ever done to Black people, even though that's kind of the formal academic practice, read all of this literature and then be able to comment on all of this literature, and in that case the -- all this

literature was history of sociology and anthropology, which has been remarkably bad to Black people, devastating to Black people. So it's maybe not read all of those things, but it's to say, okay, let me figure out, and this might be in conversation with somebody who I respect and trust, let me figure out what's a chunk, what's a good starter chunk that helps me build from there?

I think it's the same way in some ways that we've think about having -- doing abolitionist organizing. If we can't get rid of every single prison, or every single cop today, which again I'm never against if we can do that, let's do that today. But if we can't, then what is a meaningful chunk that moves us further toward the horizon of what we want and doesn't mean that we got to go back and then we learn or relearn or whatever the going back would be? What gets us one step further toward our goal. And I think that's one way to approach study when it's kind of overwhelming. That was a long-winded so I'll only respond to that one.

>> GARRETT: Thank you, Rachel. We're going to let interpretation take a brief pause and then finish what Derecka -- with Derecka and Rukia.

>> DERECKA: Are we good to go?

>> GARRETT: Yeah. We're good.

>> DERECKA: Okay. Initially it was abolition as my so overwhelming, what about the murderers, all of that. That was one of my initial things that I felt, it was just too impossible, too large, too unrealistic, all of the things I've written about. Since then there's been so many new -- I'm always trying to figure out how to do what Rachel said and to break things down and to learn them with other people and in chunks.

The most recent one has been climate change. When people talk about abolition and other people freeze up because it feels overwhelming, I get a deep sense of anxiety when I hear climate change, global warming climate crisis. It wasn't until I read the uninhabitable earth that I could actually have some sort of grasp of the concepts, some sort of grasp on what does one degree of warming mean versus two degrees, versus three, and four, and if it gets to four, how terrible it is. So the book is very, very sad, but I think it's an explainer, it helped me to understand the nature of the problem. And, yeah, what source of information we can take to stop it. Reading, asking questions, learning in very, very tiny bite-sized chunks.

Because everything you're taught about, at least everything I was taught about climate change and environmentalism has all just been dismantled, you learn the plastics industry is behind recycling, you're just like, what happened to reduce, reuse, recycle? This -- isn't this what we're supposed to do? And you learn, this is actually a way for them to justify to continue making plastic. None of it is ever stop producing plastic. Then you have to rethink that you thought that you were progressive on recycling, you've been saving your cereal boxes when actually you have to do away -- way more than that if you're going to try to save the planet.

So climate change has been something I've been really trying to study and develop an analysis around, because it's -- the planet is going to be abolished if we don't figure out how to save it soon enough.

The question around disability also is now one of the conversations I've been trying to definitely learn a lot more, and that started in law school. So in the movement for Black lives initially released their policy platform, the journal that was -- I was editor of, we did a call for papers. To see how people were using the policy platform in their organizing, their teaching. And in our call for papers we received a lot of responses that were critiques of the BLM platform through a disability analysis. So we -- I was so excited to be able to publish those critiques, because the first time that I read any sort of critique from BRM in a way that was pushing them to be more inclusive, instead of a lot of the ridiculous critiques.

Since then they've gone through iterations of updating the platform to include that analysis, both the -- the first time I was reading about autism and disability, and Deaf, and hard of hearing in relation to police violence and prison violence, and -- it was quite remarkable how that journal has definitely helped to shape my politics around disability. But it's something I know I still have to learn about around. So the question, the theory, the abolition is movement leaving people who have a disability justice practice framework behind, one thing I try to think about, who are the people who are disability justice advocates who are in abolitionist spaces?

Because they're not left behind, they're there. They're there, the people who are currently signing this event, who do you look to, who do you read and turn to? So I was -- a shameless plug for that journal, it came out in 2017, you can read some of the critiques there. And you can go read the updated policy platform to see how it's been incorporated and hopefully there will be much more of that. What was the last question? There was the overwhelm, the disability justice, and what was the third question?

>> GARRETT: How do you respond to people who don't see lived experience as a credible form of knowledge for value?

>> DERECKA: How do I respond -- it depends on the people. Honestly, depends on the person. How do I say this? I am finding that there's not a one-size-fits-all to lots of these conversations. So there are some people, for example, who only care about directly impacting people and their lived experiences if it serves their goals of moderate reforms. They only want you to hear about people who are directly impacted to say, we want community policing. Or we're going to build several jails instead of to close them. Then you have people who care about people's lived experiences, and forming the policy or the law, or the panel, or the book, but it's usually as an attempt to undermine radical progressive or abolitionist aims. I have much more to say to those people than I do to people who don't value people's lived experiences.

I think maybe I've been lucky in the last few years where I've seen a political shift to absolutely try to center people's lived experiences. Now, I'm not in the funding spaces, and I will be surprised if the money also follows the people with lived experiences. And when it does, I could almost guess that it, again, goes with people who have -- it's not to the Stevie Wilsons of the world. It's not to -- there's no directly impacted conversation around Jamal, there's no -- so it depends on whose lived experiences get centered and the ones who are most vocal right now the are the people who have opportunities right now to push the conversation. And so I, maybe we'll let Rukia answer that, because I'm still formulating a lot of thoughts about it.

>> GARRETT: Rukia, we'll let you, we're over time so I want to thank our audience for sticking with us and we'll let Rukia have the last word.

>> RUKIA: I'll try to be quick, I'm sorry. I don't have an answer to that question. Because to be quite honest, I still am working on dealing with my frustration around people who do not really believe in or censor can people with lived experience. So I don't think I can have an unbiased or a fair response to that right now.

Most of the folks I work with have experience, the trauma, the horrific treatment and serious -- including myself in many ways, outside of the carceral system, but just state violence. So I just don't have a really positive response to that right now. And so I'm going to hold off on answering that question. I do -- I recognize I'm going to grow in that moment. I can grow around how to answer that. I will say that in terms of -- I do want to real quickly, I'm sorry, so much I want to respond to when we realized time was out, I shift my mind-set a little bit. One of the things I do wanted to lift up, I do want

to lift up the Harriet Tubman project, HEARD, all of those offerings that have really pushed the movement for Black lives, for us to really push a disability justice framework, and also for all of those folks who have really pushed us to also recognize our trans experiences and value and need to ensure that we are also centering trans lives as well. And so I just want to really make sure that I state that.

Because it's not -- the movement for Black lives were made up of over 150 organizations. So every time we're learning, that means you have 150 other organizations and entity and people that are also learning. And experiencing. And shifting our politics locally. To ensure that we are including conversation around those very, very important siblings of our communities. So that's really important. I wanted to mention that. To the first question around -- I don't remember what the first question is anymore. I got thrown off.

>> GARRETT: You're okay. If you want to end ewith this one, it's -- whenever you studied something you were overwhelmed by and how did you overcome --

>> RUKIA: Yes. Honestly, studying the law. In law school, studying the law was overwhelming for me because I was so disappointed in U.S. law and policy. Like, the entire system is ridiculous. And how we interpret it, the process of interpretation, like, when I say I truly felt that I was entering a space of no opportunity to actually find justice and humanity for anyone, I was just blown away. I was shocked.

I thought that at least by going to law school I would somehow open the door to some, like, amazing information that was being used inappropriately. The whole system is messed up. The whole philosophy. I just was shocked by that. And so that was overwhelming for me.

What gave me hope was actually the things I read outside of law school. It was the conversations I had outside of law school. It was this movement around abolition as a practice that actually gave me hope. In studying other forms of government and other systems of justice that actually gave me hope. And so yeah, that's what was overwhelming for me. And that's how I overcame it. Is our people. I'll end there. Thank you all so much. I also want to thank T.L. Lewis who has really -- is a disability justice advocate and Melissa Thompson who are two advocates who have really helped me and guided me in my own development around those issues. I just want to shout them out too.

>> GARRETT: Thank you to the whole team, and everyone on this call, the audience, you can't see all the stuff behind the scenes, there's like 12 people on this call, and I appreciate every single one of them, especially Rachel, Rukia, Derecka, thank you so much for, I always feel like an interloper getting to spend a couple hours with all of you. So thank you so much for making time and for everyone tuning in.

>> DERECKA: Thank you.

>> RACHEL: Thanks, everybody.