

Abolition & the State

Responses Vol. 1

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT

ABOLITIONIST
FUTURES

"IF
YOU CAN
MAKE A
STATE SO

THAT IT'S UNRECOGNIZABLE AS A STATE,
THEN I'M ALL IN." -LEANNE

BETASAMOSAKE
SIMPSON

***“If we worked toward the abolition of the carceral parts
of the state, would it be recognizable? Would it matter if
we called it the state? Would it matter if we
called it something else?”***

Robyn Maynard

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This is the first in a series of 'zines engaging questions raised in Interrupting Criminalization's *Abolition and the State: A Discussion Guide* (available at bit.ly/ICDiscussionTool). Our hope in creating the discussion guide was that it would spark and fuel engagement, debate, and sharpened analysis among abolitionist organizers around the role of the state(s) in bringing about and sustaining abolitionist futures.

As emphasized in the discussion guide, these are not merely esoteric or theoretical questions focused on some faraway future – they shape our demands, organizing, and practice in the now. Whether we are fighting for #PoliceFreeSchools, demanding universal, accessible, quality education, housing, or health care, or struggling for climate justice and the future of life on this planet, we quickly run into questions about how to achieve our visions for sustainable and liberatory communities.

- ***What kinds of institutions, infrastructure, and investments are required? Which ones stand in our way?***
- ***What forms of governance will best advance our individual and collective self-determination and survival? Which keep us mired in the web of racial capitalism?***
- ***What actions and behaviors do we think *should* be regulated in some way? How and by who?***
- ***How do we think resources should be distributed?***

This 'zine gathers reflections from two cross-border conversations held in the fall of 2022: a conversation between Interrupting Criminalization co-founder Andrea J. Ritchie and Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, co-authors of *Rehearsals for Living*, hosted by Haymarket Books on October 26, 2022 as part of the series of conversations marking the release of *No More Police: A Case for Abolition*, and a conversation hosted by Dean Spade and the Barnard Center for Research on Women on November 15, 2022 with Harsha Walia, author of *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* and William C. Anderson, author of *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition*.[†] These two virtual events posed parallel but distinct questions about abolition and the state. For the purposes of this 'zine we have organized lightly edited excerpts from the transcripts of both events according to the themes of the Abolition and the State Discussion Guide. We encourage you to check out both events online for the full context of the comments reproduced below!

We hope you will join the conversation by sharing your reflections and responses with us via email at info@interruptingcriminalization.org.

[†] Excerpts from the November 15, 2022 conversation will be marked with a dagger symbol (†).

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INTRODUCTION

By Andrea J. Ritchie from "Abolition and the State" hosted by Haymarket Press, October 26, 2022

"When a group of about 60 organizers, including Robyn and I, gathered in Miami in January 2020 to assess the state of organizing towards police abolition as part of larger movements for abolition of the prison industrial complex, we quickly came up against questions implicating our relationship to the state as abolitionist organizers.

Similar questions quickly surfaced later the same year when the 2020 uprisings popularized the call to defund police. Questions about where to invest funds, resources, and power we wanted divested from police departments - whether into different state institutions or into community-based organizations, into public housing or private community land trusts, into public health or community-based care - quickly surfaced among defund organizers from cities across the country. Questions also surfaced about what the state should be regulating, if anything, and how, or whether it should simply be concerned with meeting material needs without conditions.

Since 2020, questions around:

- *how closely to engage with state institutions;*
- *how much energy we invest in electing and collaborating with politicians and policymakers who control police budgets;*
- *whether or not to serve on government public safety task forces convened in response to movement demands;¹*
- *whether or not to call for community control of - police departments;² and*
- *whether or not to accept state funding which often comes with carceral strings attached;*

have challenged and sometimes divided abolitionist organizers working to #DefundPolice.³

Similarly, challenges to proposed “alternatives” to police responses that perpetuate policing in different forms by placing criminalized people under the control and regulation of different state actors and institutions, including coerced medical treatment, involvement of family policing systems, and other carceral social interventions have been raised.⁴

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At the root of these questions and tensions lies the question of what our relationship to the state is and should be as abolitionists, and what role the state can play in abolitionist futures.

Not all abolitionists agree on these questions. These are live conversations within our movements. They require us to excavate what we understand the state or states to be, and how our understandings are shaped by our immersion and subjugation within the settler colonial racial capitalist carceral states imposed on Turtle Island in which these conversations are unfolding. It also requires us to break open and explore the spaces between what Robin D.G. Kelley, who wrote the afterword for *Rehearsals for Living*, recently described at the Socialism 2022 conference as “the binary between state and non-state.” Kelley elaborates that, “Revolution becomes a problem if we believe that the state is *the* site of struggle. We take the state and overturn social relations. We have learned that this is not necessarily the case. We need a new way of thinking. An independent way of thinking that the state is the problem. There’s clear evidence of that. What does revolution mean in a discourse, in a framework, in which we are questioning the state as the primary or sole source of actually making things happen?”

In *No More Police*, Mariame and I ask: “What additional possibilities emerge if we move beyond the dichotomy of capturing or dismantling the modern Western State? What if our goal is not to seize the carceral state in an effort to transform it, but to seize power and resources from the police state to create conditions under which new economic systems and forms of governance can emerge?” In *Rehearsals for Living*, Robyn and Leanne engage in a rich and gorgeous dialogue around the impossibilities of freedom for Black and Indigenous peoples within settler colonial nation states imposed on Turtle Island, and the unlimited possibilities for freedom that lie beyond them.”

WHAT SHAPES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE STATE?

In both conversations this 'zine draws from, responses and reflections on abolition and the state are rooted in the predominance of settler colonial white supremacist racial capitalist nation states and our locations within them, which profoundly shape our understandings of what is inevitable in the context of nation-states and what other possibilities might lie within and beyond them.

Excerpts from the November 15, 2022 conversation are marked with a dagger symbol (†).



Harsha Walia: “Where I am, the carceral state, the Western state, the liberal state, the modern nation state, they’re all the same thing. They’re all constitutive of and made up of these same forces of violence.”†



Robyn Maynard: “For the most part, the history of the nation-state has been the history of slavery and imperialism, has been the history of an expanding global carceral state relying on policing, prisons and borders to retrench inequality. Of course, there are pockets of different places, but I think that living within a global governance structure has delimited those possibilities, not perhaps out of their own failures, but out of just the way that global wealth extraction continues in a very racially unequal way.”



Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: “Coming up in the 1990s, watching and participating in protests around James Bay to a hydro-electric development, Ipperwash, the uprising at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawá:ke the so-called “Oka Crisis” were all unfolding as I was figuring out who I was as an Anishinaabeg person in the world and how I wanted to live. I think, looking back now, those experiences really instilled in me how important things like community, land, organizing, struggle are.

I think what I learned from those early protests as a young person, is that it’s powerful to put bodies on the land in between settlers and the money, or settlers and the trees, or settlers and the resources. I have come to understand that

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when Canadian policies, laws or negotiations or inquiries or Royal Commissions fail to quell Indigenous uprisings and Indigenous resistance, then that's when the police and army are brought in. *I think at least initially I understood the state and colonialism to be interchangeable.*"

Robyn Maynard: "In Winnipeg, like other cities on the prairies, what's very visible in terms of the state is really the role of the state as a precondition to, and enforcer of, Indigenous genocide. Nearly three-quarters of jail and prison popula-



tions are Indigenous in the prairies. Winnipeg is a city where since 1919, water was diverted from the Shoal Lake Anishinaabe community of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation to Winnipeg tap water...[It's] the land of "starlight tours," where police took Indigenous folks out of the

city and left them to walk back. It's a city where if you're paying attention to anything that the state is doing, it makes a clear reality of the role of the state in making possible the violence of settler colonialism that's very much present.

As I moved to a bigger Blacker city of Montreal, closer to more folks in the Black Caribbean diaspora community, which is my own, a longstanding heart of transnational Black

power struggle, of Black folks organizing against state violence, against neo-colonial violence of Canadian imperialism, past and present, [I came into contact with] migrant justice and anti-policing organizing under the really strong leadership of Black and racialized women... [waging an] anti-racist feminist struggle from an anti-authoritarian perspective.

I would say these are some of the ways that I began to engage with thinking about the role of the state as an impediment to freedom, as a site of contestation."



Andrea J. Ritchie: "For me, I grew up in many different kinds of states. I was born in Montreal, so I grew up in a North American, settler-colonial, welfare state. As a child, I also lived for brief periods in what was a

post-revolutionary state at the time in Peru, and under a dictatorship in Haïti. I was also connected to Jamaica through my family, which, when I was growing up, was in the throes of structural adjustment, in which the World Bank and the IMF were actually playing the role of the state, were actually the driving force of distribution and organization of access to land and resources through their financial policies. That was a particular neo-colonial experience of the state.



These experiences helped me see states in different forms, and understand that they're not necessarily one thing, that they are the product of conditions and contestations for power. They're not a fixed thing. Yet, in each of those cases, they were deeply shaped by racial capitalism and settler colonialism.

At the same time, as a survivor of violence in and outside my home, and later at the hands of police, it was clear to me the state was not actually the source of safety. It wasn't distributing safety to me, to my mother, to my grandmother, to anyone in my life in a way that felt resonant to the issues that we were facing.

Then, in my early 20s, I witnessed firsthand up close, the violent enforcement of settler colonialism that Leanne referenced earlier at Kanehsatà:ke, which was first a police attack and then a full-fledged army siege laid to an Indigenous community and nation across the river a mile from where I grew up. I immediately engaged in what I felt was my role in terms of defense and solidarity and presence and witness to that community. It made it really clear to me that no matter

what story was being told about the Canadian nation-state, that was not the state that I was witnessing or I wanted to have any part of. I also heard enough stories from my mother of her experience as a migrant to the Canadian nation-state in the '60s that I didn't want any part of that state either.

At the same time, I benefited from the social welfare state. I had free healthcare. I continue to experience rage every time I have to pay a copay here, or I hear of someone who can't access medical care because of a barrier of cost. I had access to college education for less than \$10,000 a year. I was able to be on unemployment insurance for a year when I first became disabled. Before that, I was working at a national women's organization that was funded by the state.

I also came up shaped by socialist frameworks and later, communist thought and ideology, both of which have particular views of the potential role of the state. Even though there were clear ruptures in terms of my understanding of the state as a benevolent force, and a clear focus on the state as a settler, colonial, violent, racial capitalist force in Canada, the goal of movement and organizing somehow was always to take and demand more of the state. We also got caught up in Royal Commissions on gender-based violence, to redress harms past and present to Indigenous communities, to Black communities, to migrant communities, and in trying

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to shape social policy to include more people in benefits, to resist conditions on accessing social entitlements including “workfare,” to resist exclusion or policing of people through social services.

I think I’ve always had, what I’m trying to say, a confused or contested relationship with the state. Also, a recognition that there’s a spectrum of states that are shaped by context and politics, that there’s no kind of disembodied state that’s dissociated from political conditions or contestations or context. Most of us are shaped by living in or under carceral racial capitalist states that were neo-post-colonial states, even when they are fighting to be post-revolutionary states. That also shapes our understanding.”

HOW DO YOU DEFINE “THE STATE?”



Leanne Betsamosake Simpson: “I think that I’ve always understood the state to be this structure that was imposed on Indigenous peoples. That it was the architecture that enabled dispossession, extraction, racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, all of those things.”



Robyn Maynard: “I think, like many people, living as a Black woman who loves Black people and Black children has taught me that the state on stolen lands built by stolen people is, of course, a primary source of violence in our lives. [Being part of a] political community invested in solidarity with Indigenous folks to me means that the state has not been and can’t be understood as a legitimate authority in a settler society as a way of organizing land access, or use of resources, or the legitimate use of violence.”

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Dean Spade: “We know that the state in all its forms (state, local, federal, and in individual systems and institutions like schools, hospitals, jails) maintains a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence and governance—it is the only entity allowed to rule and when it does violence through war or policing it is not considered violence.



That is its key role, even if it sometimes provides programs under the guise of care.

I would also argue that one of the key functions of the state, even if we were to imagine a utopic state, if that were to exist, it would always have a border, right? And a central function of states is to decide who does and does not belong, and to enforce that with border violence.”[†]

Harsha Walia: “Because what is a nation state without a border? It would cease to exist as a state, right? And so I think that is one of those things that we need to think through about the nature of the state...



It is inseparable from the state’s relationship to private property and to capital, right? It literally is the jurisdictional

grounding for capital. It is what maintains the enclosures. The state, as we know it, does not exist in a vacuum. It is constitutive of, necessarily constitutive of, all of these forms of violence, particularly borders.”†



William C. Anderson: “There has been a universal understanding that the state is the problem. But different people had approaches to trying to either control it or get rid of it completely.

I think that one of the greatest pitfalls that we encounter when we have this conversation is the conflation of the state with society. The state is a repository for all these forms of violence. That’s what it’s for. It was not designed to free people. It was designed to give a monopoly on power to a ruling class. I’m talking about the container that the ruling class is holding society in. That is what the state is. This is the structural harm that’s been codified in the model that is establishing order and authority at the expense of others. And there’s always an “other” when it comes to the nation state, because the model requires it... Marx knew this, Engels knew this. This is why it had, the state had to, you know, “wither away.” But we know clearly at this point that states do not wither away.”†

Which functions do we want states to perform?

Can we imagine a way to perform them without policing of some kind?

What do we get from the state that we cannot directly provide for ourselves and our people?



Leanne Betasmosake Simpson: “When we’re looking for safety, when we’re looking for justice, when we’re looking for the resources that we need, whether it’s clean drinking water for our families or a school that’s safe and nurturing for our children, we’re looking towards the state, towards the legal system and often towards policing. But the state has never given our peoples any of those things. The opposite actually.”

Harsha Walia: “... the care arm of the state or the redistributive arm of the state, I would say that is secondary to the functioning of the state. That is not a primary role of the state. It is a secondary role of the state. The main function is an oppressive monopoly over violence, enforcement, and so on.



But also to emphasize secondly... that that what we do know is the redistributive arm of the state, the provision of public works like roads and hospitals and sanitation and social system, etc., that is organized by people. That is literally the people. And so, for me, it’s actually interesting because...rather than saying, ‘okay, the state has to do this for us,’ if anything, that

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actually gives me some sense of hope. Everyday people are able to build roads, have the skills to do it, have the skill set to know how to build water works, know how to create sanitation systems, right? So if they weren't working for the state, right, if they weren't in the bureaucratic arm of the state, this is actually people with the skill sets, with the labor power, with the capacity, with the imagination, with the brilliance to do this."[†]

HOW DO WE NAVIGATE THE STATE IN THE MEANTIME?



Harsha Walia: “I think one of the ways in which abolitionists relate to the state is contextual, is that it depends on the moment that we’re in, what our organizing demands are, what we are trying to fight to win. And at the same time, we can have a broader vision that seeks something bigger than that moment, right? And that those aren’t dichotomies. Those are ways in which we build. Right? We build and we fight at the same time.”†

Turning away from the politics of distraction in the state



Leanne Betasmosake Simpson: “I have been part of movements that were turning away from the state and trying to get Indigenous peoples to dream and to vision beyond. To build Indigenous worlds based on Indigenous

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ethics and Indigenous legal practices and Indigenous governance as otherwise that our ancestors lived in, that we had to sort of update to meet the needs of our peoples in contemporary times. It was a turning away from the politics of distraction in the state.

That's when I started to realize how much Indigenous life is entangled and enmeshed with the state and how difficult it is to even crack open those interstitial breathing spaces where Indigenous peoples can come together and think beyond what the state is offering, whether that's through treaties, or the Indian Act, for instance. It is a difficult internal conversation to have in our organizing spaces to move beyond activism that pressures the states into making our lives more livable. A lot of people are very attached to this kind of organizing because we're dependent upon the crumbs that the state provides. We need to dream beyond. We need to

honor our ancestors and our children and vision beyond this present moment."



Robyn Maynard: "Then what you realize is there's this continual duping into the same project... You try everything, but what you

realize is those kinds of appeals to certain kinds of state reforms do not leave anybody safer...That this idea of turning toward the state cannot get you to anything that we would consider safety, not in the place that I live."



William C. Anderson: "When something has been shown to have faults and to have these problems that are inherent in it, you have to say this is going to happen again, and learn from it, and then come with new ideas and new theory

and new approaches. This is the task at hand. So we're not really radical if we're not doing that. If we're just repeating the same thing over and over and over again and turning radicalism into tradition and into faith, then well, that's not radicalism! That's actually very conservative. So we have to break free from this sort of thinking and think beyond and think about an absolute new approach to new situations and new predicaments."^t

***How do we
engage the state
without being
distracted by it?***

***How do we
recognize when the
mechanisms of the
state are dead ends
or barriers to
liberation?***

What's really important is not to compromise when it comes to the carceral state



Robyn Maynard: “What’s really important at this time is not to compromise when it comes to the carceral state. This is something that I think really does unite many different kinds of valencies of left struggles toward the possibility of abolition...”

What I’m trying to get at, I think, is that a really crucial point of agreement is taking aim at minimizing the violence of the carceral state, understanding policing as a kind of harm, because I think we really...understand that we can’t make compromises with carceral feminists, for example, to build more “feminist jails.” There’s certain places in which there is not a possibility for a flexibility or pragmatism in terms of getting things done, because we fundamentally come at opposite goals. Thinking in that spirit is one helpful way for me to think about what is or is not a valuable coalition-making, or what is or is not a valuable way of imagining possible futures.”



Harsha Walia: “One of the ways in which we work around this question of the state for me is...if we can at least agree that the

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main tendency of the state today and now is carcerality, even if we don't believe it to be inherent...then I think one thing we can agree on is that we always have to be vigilant against the state....

Regardless of whether abolitionists are doing work and maybe we have different understandings of the state, if we can agree that the main form the state currently takes is a carceral one, then the ways in which we do our work and the strategies that we adopt will differ than if we fundamentally believe that all we need to do is reform or retool the state. Then we actually put our energies towards imagining something else rather than, frankly, what I've seen as demobilization from sometimes having misplaced faith in state systems...And then how we engage with the state in this moment, I think it really is contextual.”†

***What clarity does
a recognition that
the states in their
current forms are
carceral bring?***

***How does it ground
and shape our
analysis and
strategies?***

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Weakening the power of the carceral state



Robyn Maynard: “I think the ‘status for all’ movement is one example that shows us actually how the carceral state has the capacity to minimize its own power in some ways if we push it. In Canada we’re on the precipice of possible mass regularization for a very large number, hundreds of thousands of undocumented people, which has come from decades of struggle led by asylum seekers, by migrants, to say that we can imagine a world with no borders, that we can actually imagine stripping away the power of the state to decide who has the legitimacy to be here. Of course, mass regularization is not ending borders. It’s not an abolitionist win in a full sense, but I think you really, in some senses, actually see a minimization of that harm and success that comes from a grassroots struggle against the state.”



Harsha Walia: “In some ways demanding more of the state can sometimes actually, it can render the state effectively obsolete if you win it. So, in Canada, one of the fights right now is a fight for “status for all” people. This is a fight that’s been going on for decades in the migrant justice movement.

And the “status for all” demand is one that literally is status for all people, right? That breaks through the idea of “good” versus “bad” migrant, breaks through the politics of innocence. It’s the fight for not a single deportation, not a single detention. And even as a rhetorical device, if people won status for all, which is what we’ve been arguing for 20 years, the primary function of the border would effectively become obsolete. I mean, it doesn’t end mass global displacement. It doesn’t end mass immobility. But at the level of the local and the provincial and the federal government where we’re located, it would effectively deeply weaken the primary function of the state.”†

***What kinds of
organizing,
campaigns, demands
can truly weaken the
power of the carceral
state and make way
for something new to
emerge?⁵***

**What strategies are
most effective in
resisting Right wing
efforts to
consolidate power
over state
institutions without
legitimizing a white
supremacist carceral
state?**

Not turning to the state for protection against those who would destroy it – and us.

In the context of rising fascism around the globe, Right-wing forces are increasingly both mobilizing violence against, and seeking to seize control of, state institutions from schools to libraries to legislatures – most prominently through the January 6, 2021 attempted coup in the United States, the summer of 2021 “trucker” convoy in Canada, and ongoing and proliferating violent assaults against state institutions and infrastructure there is an instinct to turn to the state to protect itself – and all of us – from white supremacist violence.

William C. Anderson: “In a U.S. context, the state is the white supremacist threat. In a U.S. context, the state’s lifeblood is white supremacy, Christian conquest, colonialism, imperialism. The state doesn’t protect us from the Right.”[†]

Harsha Walia: “Every time people can experience our own power, can experience the possibility of what it means to be alongside your comrades, your community, that is effectively how we fight not only the state, it’s also how we fight growing fascism and the Right. Because one of the things the Right feeds on is individualism, is a fear-based politics, is fundamentally a politics against collectivity.”[†]

Moving beyond dichotomies into rehearsals



Leanne Betasamosake Simpson:

“There is often a split between where we put our energies. Do we organize and put more pressure on the state so that all of our communities have clean drinking water, or fewer women, girls and queer people

are being disappeared, or do we dream and build something different? I love when we build and organize to meet the needs of our community without the state. I love that because that’s where we communally generate the knowledge and skills we need to make something different.

I’m interested in the space between those two dichotomies because it’s obviously very important that people have drinking water. It’s very important that people have food. It’s very important that people aren’t forced to live with 17 people in a two-bedroom house in northern reserves and communities. It’s important that people have access to healthcare in the same way that I do in the southern part of Canada.

I spend a lot of time in the north working at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, which is an education

and political project where we redistribute resources from the state into the community, we have harvesters creating food security in communities, we have elders being able to teach, taking youth out onto the land, and providing a decolonial education at the community level. I think every time we come together in community and build the alternative and meet the material needs of our people, even if it's something quite small, we learn something, we unlock the knowledge that we need to build this other world. We learn how to work together better.

Those rehearsals, those coming together making sure that people have food or have clean drinking water, or have access to learning their language, those smaller projects are very, very important in terms of generating the knowledge, the skills, and the relationships to be able to bring forth another world. I think of world-making then as a beautiful process, a beautiful, frustrating struggle that maybe is alongside these other sorts of actions that we have to take to ensure that we are able to make it to next year."

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Do we actually have to definitively resolve these questions to move forward together?



Robyn Maynard: “Harsha Walia used the term, I think she said “ideologically poly” when it comes to the state. This made me laugh really hard, but also I could relate.”



Harsha Walia: “It’s more just trying to find those fissure points, depending on what we’re organizing against and the context within which we are, to work beyond the state as a vision.”[†]

Robyn Maynard: “I think that on the left, in the context of just coming up against death-making institutions, a lot of us find certain flexibility in some places due to pragmatism, due to preferring action to inaction even in moments of some real disagreements. I think that we can have principled coalitions that have come together despite some non-ideological alignments when it comes to practically trying to overturn a particular violence.

For me, a history of being involved at varying levels to work to decriminalize sex work in Canada is one example of this. You can have a large unwieldy coalition where not everyone is an abolitionist. Not everyone especially would agree about the role of the state, for example, in the freedom struggle. Yet we are coming together to temporarily agree that we are trying to push back one arm of the carceral state. I think that that's something that has informed I guess a certain flexibility that I have around this...I think that there's this way in which we can sometimes coalesce around particular ways of minimizing harm."



Andrea J. Ritchie: "I think about how even those things that feel like, okay, we can agree on something, actually can create ruptures based on how people understand the state, because people sometimes will say, 'Sure, we should decriminalize sex work, but we should regulate it,' which is actually a different kind of criminalization. Or we should make sure we decriminalize, but we should coerce people into "services" by making it a condition of their survival. Or we should presume that people want to "exit" the sex trades and we should structure what we do in the world around that.

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I also was thinking when you were talking about the “status for all” campaign, that in one way it is liberatory, and in other ways it’s re-inscribing the settler colonial state. It’s now regularizing a whole bunch of other people on land that is not the state’s to invite people to. At the same time as I am from people who would have at some point benefited from that, I think these questions about the role of the state are always in our relationship to the state, are always under our organizing even when it’s not as visible.”



William C. Anderson: “It does matter because historically a number of radical projects, revolutions, coalitions, and so on have been sabotaged, have been collapsed, have been assassinated, around the question of the state.”†

*Against the State, Within the State, Beyond the State*⁶



Harsha Walia: “We can engage the terrain of the state while building against the state. I don’t think there’s a contradiction here. I think all organizing for a very long time has recognized that to struggle

against the state doesn't mean that we cede the terrain or a strategic engagement with the state...

For me, how engagement with the state as abolitionists makes the most sense is to constantly be vigilant, to constantly be critical, to constantly claim our victories, rather than ascribe them as something that the state just inherently or naturally does...

There are ways of governing ourselves that account for care, that take into account questions of scale as needed, that take into account most fundamentally how we build relationships with each other and how we be together through the process of struggle and through the process of building, right? Through different forms of direct democracy.

And of course, I want to emphasize, they are imperfect, but what is perhaps different about them is that unlike the state, which exploitation and oppression baked into it, which cannot be reformed...in the same way that police can't be reformed, cops can't be reformed, borders can't be reformed, the state cannot be reformed. It has violence baked into it. But abolitionism teaches us we need experiments. All of these experiments of resistance and struggle and how we build life together are trying to subvert relationships of violence.

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Even if they're not always achieving it. And those are those are a constant process of struggle."[†]



Andrea J. Ritchie: "Robyn and certainly Dean Spade and many other folks talk about how the state has de-skilled us. It has made us into people who delegate everything to the state. Then to your point, Leanne, because we've delegated everything to the state, now we're all enmeshed in the state, we've lost

the capacity of just picking up the phone and checking on our neighbor instead of calling 911. We've lost the capacity to de-escalate a conflict instead of calling a cop who will most likely escalate in very harmful ways instead. We've lost the capacity to grow food for ourselves and for each other. We've lost the capacity to do lots of things that we can do for ourselves and each other...

How do we protect our experiments? Because I think the thing that I also find confusing is that, yes, we're going to try these million experiments and then the hope is that we would proliferate enough other ways of being together that we would somehow dislodge the state or make the carceral state irrelevant, or render ourselves ungovernable by the carceral state.

I'm old enough to have seen many such experiments quashed in the ways that Robyn describes, and distorted and absorbed, and crushed when they refused to be absorbed. I wonder, how do we protect our experiments and efforts to build beyond the state in the meantime?"

WHAT LIES BEYOND THE NATION STATE?



Robyn Maynard: “I’ve learned enormously from both study and from elders about extremely valuable labor that has happened across Black nationalist pan-African traditions that really come from a different way of thinking about the possibility of what nation or what

state could be and that are not identical or reducible to one another. I’ve learned a lot from, and consider as intellectual and political touchstones, many generations of Black socialist feminists, some of whom I’m in direct community with, whose lives works, and histories have greatly informed mine. I think there’s really particular ways in which the way that people have thought about organizing home space and governance from this political perspective that stands to teach us enormously about what may be some of the possibilities on abolitionist horizons...

I think that there's other ways that people have tried to stretch and make a state be something else globally. Caribbean and African anti-colonial struggles in particular, and of course, the internationalist arm of Black power struggles in North America, mapped out visions for nation that are by no means identical to the global state system. Of course, some of those visions involved just the same thing with the Black face on top, but there were others. I think the work of Adom Getachew, of William C. Anderson, of Robin Kelley, help us look at the ways that Black anti-colonial folks' freedom dreams extended well beyond a particular kind of thinking about nation and reimagined global governance in ways that were really different, of course in ways that were actively destroyed by western neo-colonial violence.

We never got to see what an international order could have looked like beyond the capitalist state, despite really valuable work by Claudia Jones, for example, to really try to build a different formation in terms of what her vision for, for example, the West Indian Federation could have been, in terms of free travel, freedom of movement and an end of capitalism in the Caribbean region. Instead, we saw, in the words of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "The Overthrow of the Revolution in Grenada," where she says "a home governed by anti-capitalist people is too dangerous to survive." We see that there have been many other ways of reimagining

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governance that have been assassinated by ongoing Western imperial projects.

I think there's so much to learn from queer Black Caribbean feminists, past and present. What we learn from M. Jacqui Alexander, she writes this beautiful piece, is that not just anybody can be a citizen, showing how in the post-colonial state, the lives of women, of queer folks of gender and sexually diverse folks, and sex workers have continued to face particular kinds of structurally mandated violence of being pushed outside of citizenship. Even in a place that has nominally reorganized itself... the way that the state has been weaponized to crush radicalism at home, even in places where it was intended to be something else, I think really has to ask us to think, 'what is the structural issue here?' In some ways, of course, we can't let imperialism off the hook, but it's important to look towards what is the structural aspect of seizing a form of governance that is upheld by centralized authority, by policing, and prisons and borders. These are some of the ways we need to think about the ways that freedom struggles have both been waged against, but also sometimes been undermined by, these same structures.

The thing I'm really trying to get at more broadly is that people have struggled towards freedom in different forms and structures, tried to make different kinds of containers for

what organizing human life could be like. I do have respect for many of these across a few political spectrums because there are many histories of waging, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and feminist struggle, of abolitionist struggle that have informed and continue to inform what home space can be, what governing human life can be, and what freedom-oriented struggle means for me.”

***What forms of
governance make
abolitionist futures
more possible?***

***How are we
practicing/can we
practice them?***



Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: “How then do we live in this deep reciprocal relationality in a way where authoritarian power is unthinkable, where hierarchy is unthinkable? I think my ancestors knew how to do that really well. They built a society without police and without a nation-state. They practice intensive diplomacy in shared territories rather than defending a line on a map. Children were educated in families and in communities. The practice of accountability came as a daily practice to prevent harm.

One of the ways that I rehearse all of that is by taking groups of Indigenous peoples out on the land and living together over the course of a week or six weeks or a few months in these tiny, smaller formations. Basically we’re an extended family trying to embody these practices, embody these ethics, and in doing that together with the plants animals we share time and space with, we learn possibility and dream about how to build this formations across scales.

In Anishinaabe thinking, humans were placed in the natural world last. The global water cycle and the diversity of ecosystems that make up the planet were already functioning and producing a richness of life. Our job wasn’t to make the world. It was already there. Our job was to listen. To

witness. To see how we could fit into the existing global cycles without ruining things. This meant practicing particular ways of relating to other living things. It meant communities embedded in an incredible kindness and into an incredible care for all living things. It meant building societies that met the needs of people so that you didn't need police and that you didn't need prisons. My ancestors were able to replicate that across scales from families to clans to communities, to this larger nation formation. And so when I use the word nationhood, I'm talking about this formation of deep relationality with these communities of living things. Whether they're plants or animals or humans sharing a particular time in a space.

Making this place and doing this rehearsal together. It's a network that's cycling through time, it's a web of intimate connections where I think of my body, not so much as a body, as a human body, but as a hub of different relationships with water, with plants, with animals, with rivers, with the cosmos, and with other humans. I think: what do we need in terms of healthcare? What do we need in terms of decision-making? What do we need in terms of leadership? What do you need in terms of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, education? What do you need to reproduce a system like that?

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What do you need to have groups of living things thinking, “What can I give up in my life to promote more life? How can I feed into this system that creates a cascading web of life?” I think that’s a more philosophical approach to that, but that’s been really useful and generative in my life for disassociating or detaching a little bit from the state.”



Andrea J. Ritchie: “The question for me then is a non-carceral state possible. I think I just want to name that we’ve been talking about different kinds of states. We’ve been talking about settler states, we’ve been talking about racial capitalist states, we’ve been talking about carceral states. As Leanne was saying at the beginning, I don’t know if those are all interchangeable. They all seem interrelated and interlocking, but I wonder even if you peel away a racial capitalist state, do you still have a carceral state?”

Is there a way to have a non-carceral state? Ruthie [Ruth Wilson Gilmore] would say, ‘yes, we should have an abolitionist state. Why wouldn’t we want that? Why wouldn’t we fight for that?’ But I don’t know if, based on my organizing and my experience representing folks in different systems,

if are there any arms of states as we know them that aren't carceral? Everywhere I look they are, but do they have to be?

Dean Spade says the state is by definition a "technology of extraction." That the state's function inherently is, through centralization of resources and bureaucratic institutions, to sort and distribute life chances. Is that unique to carceral racial capitalist settler-colonial states? Or is that some essence of a state formation that will inevitably exclude someone: non-citizens, migrants, disabled people, queer and trans people, whoever is excluded from some notion of the collective good? And will we always be in contestation about who's in and who's out?

I think that's where my struggle lies, is that I really struggle to envision an abolitionist nation-state.

I'm curious about whether that means all centralized infrastructures of governance and resource distribution themselves are irrecuperable. I'm really inspired, Leanne, by your vision of an unapologetic place-based nationhood, using Indigenous practices, operating in an ethical and principled way, from an intact land base. I feel curious and conflicted about how to engage it without romanticizing or colonizing it."



Robyn Maynard: “European empires, through projects of massive land theft, as part of a condition for their possibility, relied on a steadily expanding infrastructure of prisons, modeled from the slave ports in West Africa, in

which convict labor played an important role to these economies. This is part of retrenching the continent under European control in what was called the ‘scramble for Africa.’ That also, at the same time, destroyed other modes of governance, ways of organizing land, and created discrete political units for an administration that again, eventually became a nation-state. There’s nothing natural about this emergence anywhere, and it’s deeply implicated with the history of the development of carceral expansion everywhere.

I think that what becomes clear is that the formal end of colonization repurposed police forces and prisons, but didn’t eradicate them. That’s not to say that people didn’t try for other kinds of governance, but that these carceral formations stayed with us. Today, we have Haitians being deported from The Bahamas, we have migrants being rounded up in South Africa – borders of the nation-state are killing us globally.

To think about this question differently, I think one of the questions you'd thrown out there, Andrea, is what might an abolitionist and anti-capitalist state look like? I would rephrase it a little bit, to say what might abolitionist and anti-capitalist futures look like, and what kinds of governance, what forms of governance would or could be amenable to that, and to start from there and work outwards? Because, if we know that most of the world functioned for most of human history in the absence of what we would call a centralized Westphalian state, if we know that this is born of European imperialism, there's no reason to presume the state, to think with what you were saying before, Leanne, is immutable or inevitable. That there have been many other forms of governance that have existed and many will likely emerge afterward.

Do we need an abolitionist state or do we need something else? Do we need many something elses? If we believe that human societies can occur without surveillance, without police policing and caging human beings, why can't we also imagine it's possible to organize having people's needs met without centralized authoritarian forms of distributing power and upholding legitimate violence? What might the world look like if it wasn't organized into discrete sort of members-based units with hierarchical structure and this insider-outsider model of the citizen and the non-citizen?

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This is part of asking, 'what might a world look like beyond capitalism?' And it asks us to think about that a little bit further: instead of saying 'what could be the one thing that the state has become?' I think the question of 'how do we create a world that meets people's needs?' helps to get us there somewhat differently.

I think that there's histories of stateless societies broadly conceived. Cedric Robinson, for example, in the *Terms of Order*, talks about the Ila-Tonga and Agrarian Bantu-speaking people who are living in what's now called Zambia, who lived, have lived, and live as communities without hierarchy and political authority, of which there are many others. Leanne has provided other examples of historical contexts here in the places where I'm speaking to you from.

There's so many aspects of what we know to be the state, for example, child welfare, border controls, public education, that have punishment and surveillance built into how they function, that are central to the modern state formation that we know. That must be abolished for us to have anything that that's like freedom. ***If we worked toward the abolition of the carceral parts of the state, would it be recognizable? Would it matter if we called it the state? Would it matter if we called it something else?***

I think that project of imagination is as important, and thinking about governance imaginatively is as important as the kinds of kaleidoscopic imaginings that we need to imagine the ways that we could solve harm without centralized violence workers. Ericka Edwards has these words that I just wanted to bring out that are so helpful in the introduction to the newer version of Cedric Robinson's *Terms of Order*. She says, 'If we agree that human relationships exceed order, and that, in fact, they flourish best when given over to a naturally disorderly order of things, the natural world, body, the ancestors, the experimental, then violence doesn't rightly belong to anyone.'

Given the history of the ways that the state has emerged as a way of organizing violence and inequality on a global scale, I think it is important that whatever we decide to call it, decentralizing violence and legitimating violence are things we do not accept if we are abolitionists against violence and harm. Then we're also against violence and harm being something that is proxy to one particular authority that we grant legitimacy in our lives."



Andrea J. Ritchie: "I think of how paradigm shifting or how perspective shifting the framework that you're offering is: what do aboli-

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tionist futures look like, and then what forms of governance get us closer there...It reminds me of INCITE! organizing itself around the question "what would make women, trans, and gender-nonconforming people safe?" Not "how do we work with what we have to make it better?" It was, "Let's start with the central thing that matters to us." That's also Black feminism and Indigenous feminism, right? How do we start from the well-being of the people who were currently living at the intersections of the interlocking systems that we're trying to tear down?"

HOW DO OUR RESPONSES SHAPE WHAT WE DO NOW?



Andrea J. Ritchie: “What are the potential consequences of turning away from the state as a site of contestation in the context of the global rise of fascism, accelerating climate collapse?

Are there institutions of the state that we can and must fight for... to house us, to provide healthcare, to feed us, to provide clean water, to hold some kind of global agreement around how we meet climate collapse or catastrophe? Can we hold any of those things while extracting policing from them? Is there some way that... you can redistribute a state’s resources without redistributing the policing and carceral-ity of the state with it? How does that program that you were describing, Leanne, take the resources from the state, but not take the policing carceral strings that come with it?

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Are there ways that we need to be fighting to keep public schools and just keep the cops out of them, to keep public water systems, but make sure no one's water is ever fucking turned off in a way that it is in Detroit?

Is there some fight that I should be engaged in while white supremacists, less than 30 miles from me, are arguing to take all kinds of books out of schools, and to punish teachers who teach certain things, and to police and punish children who are certain ways in school districts. Is there some fight I need to be engaged in to ensure survival and securing these institutions as we rehearse otherwise?

If we turn away from the state, are we conceding to the Federalist Society, who just recently declared that the Right must grow rather than shrink the state, and continue to more explicitly wield it as a 'blood instrument' to impose a white supremacist fascist agenda, which it's already doing, but to just do that more? The shifting beyond, the turning away from the state to make more room for community, for things that are happening beyond the state, but without conceding the state to white supremacists, I think these are questions that people have posed as challenges to this space that we've been thinking in."



Harsha Walia: "I would emphasize that anti-authoritarian politics against the state is not individualistic. It is not the same thing as Right-wing libertarian politics. In fact, it requires us to be present. It requires us to make politics. It requires us to be collective, requires us to practice democracy. And even though Ruthie [Ruth Wilson] Gilmore would perhaps not agree with where I would conclude about the nature of the state, I think it follows the trajectory of abolitionist thought in that, when Ruthie tells us that abolition requires presence. I would also extend that to...anti-authoritarian politics requires us to be present."[†]



Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: "You start with how do you maintain the well-being, or how do you support the well-being of your local community? If you let that kind of ethic then drive your engagement, I think that that then tells you what to do or tells you what's possible.

Sometimes that might mean engaging with the state. Sometimes that might mean taking in a short-term or in a medium-term, taking whatever those resources are.

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Whether that's fighting for clean water, fighting for abortion, fighting for books, fighting for knowledge.

I don't feel like I'm in a position to tell anybody in terms of how they should be organizing, or the tools that they should be using in the community that they are in, given the circumstances that they're in. One thing that I really appreciate I heard Robin D.G. Kelley say in a podcast the other day. He was compelling us to act. Compelling us to not just ride this out and think that fascism is going to just go away, and that the state is going to wake up and suddenly going to meet our needs. We're in the fight of our lives. We're in a struggle. Acknowledging that is important. We need to fight."



Robyn Maynard: "We live at a time where, a lot of the state, I think, whether we want it to or not, is among one of the places in which we will struggle. We've seen the harm that comes from state abandonment, crumbling public infrastructures that are not amenable to conditions that allow us to build thriving movements. The fact that the massive defunding of hospitals, public healthcare, long-term care, for example, we saw in the context of the pandemic, are quite literally leaving our elders, folks who are disabled, and many other people in harm's way.

I think because of the very racial, gendered, and abled unevenness of access to lifesaving public infrastructures, I think that to abandon those is something that would be too dangerous to consider. I think that there's really important work happening, for example, to push back to support libraries against ... what's called the "anti-woke" movement, but it's a sort of neo-McCarthyism that's trying to get rid of public libraries and public education as places where you could even learn about the actual history of the places that you lived. As somebody who spent an entire chapter of my book looking at the afterlives of slavery in the public school system in Canada, I think that what abolition is not calling for is a libertarian abandonment of the idea of some way of making sure that kids can go to school, and that kids can learn, especially for people who have less access to education.

One way of thinking about this 'both/and' moment - I was actually just thinking about this as I was at a presentation by community workers who had been a part of the support for people living in encampments during and after the pandemic, especially, in tent encampments in Toronto. They were highlighting the ways in which the city failed to meet people's needs by turning off the drinking water, by having shelters that were drastically overcrowded. They were also engaged in really important mutual aid projects, of course, with encampment residents, in which a really vast network

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of encampment support networks were created, where people were bringing drinking water, tents, sleeping bags, supporting one another with the kinds of things they would need. At the same time, to think with this 'both/and,' people continue to push demands on the city to turn on the water. I think that you'd never want to abandon the idea that the water should be turned on, that not only should the police stop coming into the park and taking people's tents, but that people should be offered housing. To me, I don't see these as contradictory in the context of just really preserving life-affirming infrastructures in the absence of them.

As we are trying to push for a care-based society being expansive, we work through being really careful about what that means, about not allowing the vastly expanded way that policing is being brought into healthcare as part of mental health policing, but to try to move those carceral aspects away, while still saying that we want and believe in supports, that we want to have as a society based in caring for everyone.

That's a kind of agreement that I think really separates us from the Right-wing push against state, that's actually just a push against any kind of collectivism and for individualism that really is a survival-of-the-fittest model that, particularly in this context, leave so many of us even more vulnerable

to premature death as Ruthie [Ruth Wilson Gilmore] calls it, than before.

If we think about abolition as presence, and we're very careful about what that presence might be, then again, does it matter if we call it the state or not? Not necessarily. Does it matter as we fight to make sure that there are public libraries if we could imagine a more liberatory way that libraries would and could be organized in the future? If we want to save the idea that public education must exist, but believe it has to be radically transformed in order to not be a site of policing and mass violence for young Black people as it currently is today?"



Andrea J. Ritchie: "I'm hearing Mariame's voice very loudly in my head. One of the things that she really organizes some of her thinking around these issues is the notion of the commons, and funding the commons. The commons being rooted in her thinking, and mine as well, in the Black feminist politic of collective care, which all of us have been speaking to, that you've been speaking to Leanne in the context of Indigenous communities, of communities that are organized around an ethic, a whole ideological framework and practice of care. It's a praxis, really. We are enacting collective care by funding the

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commons, which is an unpoliced space, an unpoliced set of resources that we access without condition, where we meet needs as needs. Brendan McQuade calls that process ‘commoning against security,’⁷ so funding the commons against the notion that we need to have security, which is protection of capital basically, and protection of individuality.”



Harsha Walia: “Sometimes we also conflate the redistributive arm of the state to...say that the state is, that arm of the state is, the commons. And here I would strongly make the point that the state’s provision of public goods when it does so is not what the

commons is, that I think there’s some confusion about this because the commons is a fundamentally different concept. The commons is an idea of inclusion and access as inherent, not something that’s granted or mediated by the state, and also not something that is individually possessed. It is cooperative. It is not a commodity, it is not even a service.

The commons or communing or commoning is necessarily a verb, and the state form actually originated in order to enclose and destroy the commons, as we know. And so I think it’s important to, it may seem like it’s just a semantic thing, but I think it is important to differentiate between what we want to build, which may include a sense of the commons, of

abolitionist commons, of commoning. But the redistributive arm of the state takes hoarded and stolen and confiscated wealth, and turns it into a public service that is individualized, that can be commodified, and that can be given or taken as a right, which is different than our concept of what a commons would be.”†



Robyn Maynard: “As much as we learn from the past, we’re going to need to improvise. Abolition is conjure work, and it’s science fiction, and it’s many other imaginative things that I think that we’ve really been trying to bring to the forefront. The future is unwritten, but the best that we can do is to stack the deck with everything that we have, with everything that we have available to us, in defense of all earthly life.”

“If we think about abolition as presence, and we’re very careful about what that presence might be, does it matter if we call it the state or not?”

Further Reading/Watching

"The Role of the State in Abolitionist Futures," Robyn Maynard, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Haymarket Books, October 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqaz90hfGhk>

"No borders! No prisons! No cops! No war! No state?," a conversation with Harsha Walia, William Anderson, and Dean Spade, Barnard Center for Research on Women, November 15, 2022, <https://bcrw.barnard.edu/event/no-borders-no-prisons-no-cops-no-war-no-state/>

"The State: Abolitionist? Fascist? Communist? Bourgeois?," Center for Place Culture and Politics (CPCP) 2023 Conference: May 5, 2023, <https://pcp.gc.cuny.edu/2023/06/video-cpcp-2023-conference-the-state-abolitionist-fascist-communist-bourgeois/#more-1073>

Seizing the State w/ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, A World To Win Podcast, September 14, 2022, <https://blurbry.com/aworld-towin/89458775/seizing-the-state-w-ruth-wilson-gilmore/>

Freedom Dreams, Episode 5 – Harsha Walia, Robin D.G. Kelley, Haymarket Books, February 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp-UBJT5DnQ>

Chua, C., Linnemann, T., Spade, D. et al. Police abolition. *Contemp Polit Theory* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00640-6>

Endnotes

- 1 For more discussion of this subject, check out Andrea J. Ritchie, Megyung Chung, Diana Zúñiga, with an Appendix by Anand Subramanian. *Navigating Public Safety Task Forces: A Guide From The Ground. Interrupting Criminalization*, August 2021.
- 2 For critiques of the notion of community control of police departments, please see Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, *No More Police: A Case for Abolition* (New Press 2022); Beth E. Richie, Dylan Rodríguez, Mariame Kaba, Melissa Burch, Rachel Herzing and Shana Agid. *Problems With Community Control of Police and Proposals for Alternatives*. Fall 2020.
- 3 See Andrea J. Ritchie. *#DefundPolice #FundThePeople #DefendBlackLives The Struggle Continues*. February 2023; Mimi E. Kim, Megyung Chung, Shira Hassan & Andrea J. Ritchie. *Defund the Police - Invest in Community Care: A Guide to Non-Police Mental Health Crisis Response*. *Interrupting Criminalization*, May 2021; Andrea J. Ritchie, *The Demand Is Still #DefundPolice #FundthePeople #DefendBlackLives*, *Interrupting Criminalization* 2021, bit.ly/DefundPoliceUpdate.
- 4 “No Soft Police!,” panel hosted by *Interrupting Criminalization*, February 2023, <https://www.interruptingcriminalization.com/event-recordings>; Mimi E. Kim, Megyung Chung, Shira Hassan & Andrea J. Ritchie. *Defund the Police - Invest in Community Care: A Guide to Non-Police Mental Health Crisis Response*. *Interrupting Criminalization*, May 2021.

5 So is this Actually an Abolitionist Proposal or Strategy?, Interrupting Criminalization, Project Nia, and Critical Resistance, 2022, bit.ly/OrganizingBinder

6 This framework, drawn from organizers in the Global South, is summarized by Mijente their video Building Power Sin, Contra y Desde El Estado, Mijente, 2022, <https://mijente.net/2022/04/building-power-sin-contra-y-desde-el-estado/>

7 Kelly Hayes, "Abolition Means Reclaiming the Commons and Rejecting Securitization," Movement Memos Podcast with Brendan McQuade, TruthOUT, February 3, 2022, <https://truthout.org/audio/abolition-means-reclaiming-the-commons-and-rejecting-securitization/>



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