

ABOLITION IS...

A STUDY RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS, BY STUDENTS

Abolition Is... Study Series

“Abolition and Reparations: Histories of Resistance, Transformative Justice and Accountability”

by Patrisse Cullors

Summary

In her article [“Abolition and Reparations: Histories of Resistance, Transformative Justice and Accountability, Patrisse Cullors](#) (Black and queer artist, educator, organizer and co-founder of Black Lives Matter) highlights the intersections between abolition, reparations, and transformative justice. By exploring the relationship between theory and practice, Cullors advocates for a vision of abolition that is rooted in “people’s power; love, healing, and transformative justice; Black liberation; internationalism; anti-imperialism; dismantling structures; and practice, practice, practice” (1685). Cullors investigates the history of abolition and provides her own narratives of how she has (or hasn’t) engaged with abolitionist practice. Cullors envisions abolition as a two-pronged project of demolishing systems of oppression and repairing histories of harm. Here, reparations and transformative justice work in tandem with one another in the project of creating abolitionist futures. Reparations, for Cullors, is an internationalist movement that generates both state and community accountability, as well as a promotion of communal accountability for historically disenfranchised peoples. Cullors emphasizes that accountability is key to transformative justice, which is underscored by the beliefs that no human is disposable and that both structural and interpersonal harm must be addressed through restorative (not punitive) practices. All in all, Cullors emphasizes that PIC abolition functions as a “cultural intervention” that demands imagination, care, accountability, and community-building.



Patrisse Cullors

Artist, Author, Educator & Political Strategist

“Abolition means setting, communicating, and respecting boundaries. Abolition means reinforcing those boundaries when they are not heard. Abolition means transformative justice. Abolition allows one time to heal. Abolition seeks to repair the damage done to a person or a people. Abolition holds space for the person or people who have perpetrated violence, harm, and damage. **Abolition makes the impossible possible.**” —Patrisse Cullors

Terms to Know

Abolition: Abolition—more specifically “prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition”—is a political vision and everyday practice with the goal of eliminating all prisons, punishment, and policing while creating the necessary conditions for safe, healthy, and empowered communities ([working definition via Critical Resistance](#)). As Cullors explains, abolition “takes consistent and committed work to upend the systems that make prisons, policing, and domestic and international warfare possible” (1684).

Transformative Justice: Transformative Justice (TJ) is an approach to justice guided by the belief that structures of oppression underlie all instances of harm, both on interpersonal and systemic levels. Hence, TJ practices directly confront the role of systemic oppression in harm and violence in order to create modes of communal accountability and healing that work to upend the carceral logics inherent to all criminal legal systems ([working definition provided by Transform Harm](#), updated 2020).

Reparations: Reparations is an approach to address and repair the violence caused by centuries of European settler-colonialism through practices of cultivating state and community accountability. Reparations can take the form of “financial restitution, land redistribution, political self-determination, culturally relevant education programs, language recuperation, and the right to return (or repatriation)” (1686). Reparations also focuses on building transnational relationships and developing solidarities with colonized and historically disenfranchised peoples around the world (working definition provided by Patrisse Cullors, updated April 2019).

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1. Note: Transformative Justice and Restorative Justice (RJ) are not the same processes. TJ is distinct from RJ in that it must only happen outside the state and its systems, whereas RJ may or may not align with the state ([Fumbling Towards Repair](#))

Questions for Reflection

1. Cullors describes different instances in her own life where she engaged in radical experimentation with abolitionist practice. Recall a moment in your own life where you felt you engaged in radical, abolitionist experimentation. What conditions were you responding to? How did it feel to navigate this situation using an abolitionist perspective?

2. What is a moment in your life that you handled punitively? In what ways have you called upon the PIC in the past? How did you perpetuate carceral and punitive practices within your interpersonal relationships? How would you approach this situation differently in order to engage in radical experimentation and abolitionist practice?

3. Where in your life have you noticed the connections and/or the distinctions between the systemic and the interpersonal structures that Cullors describes? What might these relationships indicate about how we understand, process, and address harm within our communities?

4. How is reparations a mode of abolitionist practice? How do you think both the state and communities can engage in actions of accountability to ensure reparations (i.e. do you see any potential for collaboration between the state and communities)? In thinking about your own identities, what does reparations mean to you?

5. On page 1687 Cullors outlines the following 12 principles of her abolitionist praxis:

(1) have courageous conversations; (2) commit to response versus reaction; (3) experiment: nothing is fixed; (4) say yes to one's imagination; (5) forgive actively versus passively; (6) allow oneself to feel; (7) commit to not harming or abusing others; (8) practice accountability for harm caused; (9) embrace non-reformist reforms; (10) build community; (11) value interpersonal relationships; (12) fight the U.S. state and do not make it stronger. I ask that you sit with these vignettes, reflect on your own experiences, and begin to sketch your own abolitionist praxes and testimonies.

5a) What strikes you about Cullors' principles for abolition? Which principle(s) do you utilize in your life? Which principle(s) seem the most challenging to you? Record your reactions, thoughts, and ideas.

5b) In addition to the principles that Cullors offers, what are some of your own personal principles that guide your abolitionist practice? If you do not have any, take the lessons shared by Cullors and brainstorm some abolitionist principles you would like to incorporate in your life. Why are these commitments important to you?

For more reflection on the relationship between abolition, reparations, and transformative justice, see:

- Walidah Imarisha, Alexis Gumbs, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, adrienne maree brown, and Mia Mingus, [“The Futures and Fictions of Transformative Justice”](#) from The New Inquiry
- The Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, [“Transformative Justice and Community Accountability”](#)
- Jonathan Ben-Menachem, [“Policing Can’t End Violence in the U.S., But Reparations Might”](#), from Current Affairs

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