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A Note on Collective Experimentation Toward Abolition

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IN THE SECOND YEAR OF MY PHD PROGRAM, I took SA Smythe’s Blackness & Borderscapes course, where we were assigned to read Harney and Moten’s (2013) The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study. We discussed a quote that still permeates my theory of change today. In the prelude, Jack Halberstam says this:

“We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after “the break” will be different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break.” (p. 6)

Whenever I revisit this quote, I begin to meditate on the complexity of abolition, including arguments against it. Working from an abolitionist praxis comes with contending with an iterativeness that does not bode well against arguments from those who choose to ignore the experimentation of our society’s infrastructure; that is, people fail to understand that we are living in an ever-changing yet ubiquitously carceral imagination of specific people. When Ruth Wilson Gilmore tells us that “abolition is life in rehearsal,” she means that there is no one final destination, but that our perspectives shift as our social context and collective dynamics do (Gilmore, 2020). That experimentation needs to happen to get to something different. Not that the something different is an end, but a beginning to a new beginning, which will always require constant shifting.

This does not mean we should forget or fail to resist captivity, “the hold” (Sharpe, 2016), or the legacies of slavery in the present moment (Hartman, 2007), but that the experimentation of our well-being should rest in the hands of those who have weaved together an intricate lineage of wisdom stemming from generational experiences and histories of resistance, or what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to as lived experience.

Those against abolition will always say there is a level of vagueness when we answer the question, “What’s your plan if this system is gone?” That is because there is vagueness—a distinct and uncomfortable level of the unknown or the abstract. Simply put, we are often faced with questions we do not yet have an answer to, and often the answers are inherently dynamic. Moreover, there will never be one succinct plan. There are many plans connected to a rich history of ideas and concepts and experiments created by those who have remained under attack. These give us a picture of how things could be.
Abolitionist Perspectives in Social Work is a venue for this collective experimentation. It is a venue for correcting and adding to the archives, radical record-keeping, and collective knowledge-making. This is a space where rigorous evidence does not mean excluding particular methods or methodologies but rather where it means that stories of those most impacted are constitutive of our most integral pieces of knowledge. In this journal, randomized controlled trials do not dictate who is considered a notable scientist. Instead, our first edition deeply interrogates the harms of policing, incarceration, mandatory reporting, and transracial adoption, plotting how we dismantle capitalism, and the need for abolitionist strategies for collective action to resist legislative terror. In other words, the articles in our first edition outline our deepest desires for something different.

Each article is one point on a map created for us, by us. Together, the articles provide new insight into geographies that have been obscured and pushed out of the academy by those who have been and remain in control of what becomes our “knowledge base.” These actors depend on maintaining the status quo because it upholds a certain categorization of “expertise” that is unobtainable and untenable for those most marginalized. Those who resist the abolitionist experimentation that we call for may do so in fear of the outcomes, which by necessity calls into question the status and legitimacy of oppressive systems as well as the carceral realities of our present.

The next time someone asks, “What happens after ___ is gone?” point them to those experimenting, resisting, and thriving against all odds. Point them to the articles within this journal. And continue to dream and experiment and create—to move our ideas for a better world to reality.

AUTHOR NOTE
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REFERENCES