

Critical Conversation #1: Intersectionality

September 15, 2021

Moni Cosby: Hey, y'all. Welcome. Thank you for coming to our Study and Struggle Critical Conversation on intersectionality. I am super excited for this conversation with our incarcerated comrades and with MK, with Mariame - also intimidated! This is going to be awesome.

Before we start, I want to share something with everyone. So I shared this in a couple different places. There is a Supreme Court case called O'loné vs. Shabazz. This is the dissenting opinion. I would encourage you to check out the case. This is the dissenting opinion authored by Justice Brennan.

"Prisoners are persons whom most of us would rather not think about. Banished from everyday sight, they exist in a shadow world that only dimly enters our awareness. They are members of a "total institution" that controls their daily existence in a way that few of us can imagine:

"[P]rison is a complex of physical arrangements and of measures, all wholly governmental, all wholly performed by agents of government, which determine the total existence of certain human beings (except perhaps in the realm of the spirit, and inevitably there as well) from sundown to sundown, sleeping, waking, speaking, silent, [482 U.S. 342, 355] working, playing, viewing, eating, voiding, reading, alone, with others. It is not so, with members of the general adult population. State governments have not undertaken to require members of the general adult population to rise at a certain hour, retire at a certain hour, eat at certain hours, live for periods with no companionship whatever, wear certain clothing, or submit to oral and anal searches after visiting hours, nor have state governments undertaken to prohibit members of the general adult population from speaking to one another, wearing beards, embracing their spouses, or corresponding with their lovers." *Morales v. Schmidt*, 340 F. Supp. 544, 550 (WD Wis. 1972).

It is thus easy to think of prisoners as members of a separate netherworld, driven by its own demands, ordered by its own customs, ruled by those whose claim to power rests on raw necessity. Nothing can change the fact, however, that the society that these prisoners inhabit is our own. Prisons may exist on the margins of that society, but no act of will can sever them from the body politic. When prisoners emerge from the shadows to press a constitutional claim, they invoke no alien set of principles drawn from a distant culture. Rather, they speak the language of the charter upon which all of us rely to hold official power accountable. They ask us to acknowledge that power exercised in the shadows must be restrained at least as diligently as power that acts in the sunlight."

That's my favorite dissenting opinion ever. I chose that particular piece because I think it speaks to prison. I will disagree a little bit about how awesome the Constitution is, but I get the sentiment, right? It says no act will can sever us from the body politic even though the body politic for a lot of folk wills this to be, but this is just not the case. These are some of things we will be talking about. We are not severed from the body politic. All people incarcerated are is exactly that. We are just locked up. We are not really really gone. I am looking forward to getting into this. Mariame?

Mariame Kaba: Oh, thank you so much, Moni. Do you want to introduce yourself and say a little about you? And I will throw over to me after.

Moni: I am Monica Cosby. I am a grandma. I am overwhelmed with the fact I am a grandma even though I have been one since I came out of prison but every so often and more and more it hits me and ultimately I am a grandma. I'm an organizer and activist and I do what I do because I want us all free. May I say something? I heard someone say or rather someone tweeted about and then someone else checked me about this because I would say things like I am probably not going to see abolition in my lifetime, and stuff like that, and I got two different checks. One was a random tweet I saw. I can't remember who it was but one person said to me, "fool, we do this every day. You see it every day. You talk about it every day." So, yeah, I have been like really, really wrong. I see abolition every day. I am glad for it. Now, Mariame.

Mariame: Thank you so, so much Moni for kicking us off in the way you did. Good evening or good afternoon depending on where you are joining us from. I am really honored to be part of this evening's event alongside my friend and comrade Monica Cosby. It is also such an honor to be in virtual conversation with Amber and April and Tank. Thanks, also, to Study and Struggle for the invitation for all of us to be in conversation and for so much of the behind the scenes work to make this possible today. We are just really both very grateful for that and appreciate all the labor because I know how much labor goes into that. Thanks also to Haymarket for all the behind the scenes work that you all do to make these conversations possible.

Honestly, I really feel like I just want to listen tonight. I think that the people who are experts tonight are my co-presenters and co-panelists. I learn a lot from Monica on a regular basis just by witnessing what she does in the world, who she is, how she moves and so, you know, always interested in continuing to learn, constant student on my end. One thing I was noticing, you will be hearing some audio clips from Amber, April, and Tank tonight. And I picked out one part of an audio clip that you will be hearing and it was Amber at some point who said "I am not allowed to hug someone even if they are crying because that's a 244 rule violation -- public display of affection." That stuck with me. It is something I know intellectually in my brain and my head. But I think just hearing Amber articulate that really sat with me in a particular kind of way and for my entire adult life, and probably even when I was a young person, I understood in real ways that prison was a rupture but that folks inside were constantly doing this really important life-giving work of weaving. Weaving what you will also hear mentioned in one of the audio pieces, these webs of connection. These webs of connection. It is not just people on the inside, though, who are doing that. Some of us on the outside try really hard to weave webs of connection amongst ourselves on the outside in order to find a way to connect with our comrades on the inside and loved ones on the inside. I have been thinking a lot about the labor of doing that connecting. The labor which so difficult. Often, labor that we are doing in really kind of surreptitious, in hidden ways because as Monica spoke to in her opening, there is this kind of, you know, the "legalese" of rules and laws and all these things that are to enforce this prison as rupture, right? We are always trying to overcome that. So I want to speak to the draining parts of that. The not joyful parts of that. The affective and institutional labor of that, today, as we talk, as we keep going. Then I want to think about the other side which is the suturing of the ruptures

that we're always engaged in all the time. And that being it's own project of care, and care work. And so we're gonna talk a little bit tonight about the concept of intersectionality though I don't think that's the most critical thing to be focused on tonight. We are also going to be talking about relationships and we are going to be talking about care and we are going to be talking about ways forward led by the people on the inside who know best and the most and from whom we ought to take our marching orders. That's a little bit about what is on my mind this evening. It is all over the map and all over the place. I didn't write actually notes down but these are thoughts coming through as I was listening to the audio prior to this event tonight. We will both have more to say after we hear from our comrades. Monica, do you have something else that you want to add in before we throw over to Sean?

Moni: No, I don't. That was beautiful. Thank you so much.

Mariame: Absolutely. Sean, we can go to the first clip.

Intersectionality:

Amber Fayefox Kim: Intersectionality is a huge deal. My brain melted when I read the Combahee River Collective statement. I got a copy of that and like, that made me understand like, what exactly is really being talked about here because we have all these different identities that are just floating off in space, right?

At least that's the way they're treated by the system. Somebody, I think I've used this example before in a lot of places: somebody is disabled and they're going to church, right? So that means they have this religious identity and they have this disabled identity and trying to get an accommodation in prison, the prison forces you to treat those two things as completely separate.

So you end up being in a situation where the chaplain's office and the ADA coordinator are going to both be pointing at each other, saying, nope, it's the other guy's job. Because the person is treated as only having one identity at a time. When the person talks to the ADA coordinator, they're treated as having this religious identity. When the person's speaking to the chaplain, they're treated as having this disabled identity.

That allows each of those functionaries to say, not my problem, and the person's problems then don't get fixed. Only by treating a person as having these multiple identities, do you actually get anywhere moving forward. And in forcing that and not allowing the system to erase any of your identities? Like forcing the system to recognize I have intersectionality, then actually causes them to have to answer you when you're doing, this push for change.

I also think that the intersectionality part is really important because it leads you to different conclusions. So if we just consider people of color, then sure there's a list of issues that we're going to attack, but that's not going to help women. That's not going to help people with disabilities. That's not going to help LGBTQ people. That's not going to help someone who's from a religious minority or any of a thousand different identities that a person can have. So that's where I think that's important. And I also think that then that relates back to that need to be

genuine and that need to be interconnected because without those two things, you're not going to get to the bottom of a person's intersectionality.

April Harris: For me, it came to the point where I don't want to live in a country that has 25% of the world's prison population. And I don't want to live in the country that still uses a form of slave labor that still incarcerates Black and Brown bodies at a much higher rate than whites, and claims freedom for all but for 2.5 million in prison. And as I began volunteering, my reasons changed a bit.

About 10 years now. And Colby comes to see me regularly. And I basically am like the reporter. I kinda like, I'm the one that reports everything, so I think that's my job. I am the one that when I see injustice or when certain things are happening, I'm the one that does the alert, that's the media alert, to let them know. Whether I have to wake them up in the middle of the night by email or whatever. I'm the one that's telling them what's going on.

So two months ago, transgender inmates were allowed to transfer to women's facilities, but the system chose to make a spectacle out of them by passing out condoms to the entire population once they arrived, announcing their difference, which separates all parties involved for harassment, discrimination and differential treatment while creating and encouraging a hostile environment.

I feel like most of us have multi-, multiple categories that intersect to make up our identity. Although we have different life experiences, we still should have empathy for others, I believe. I know of two transgender inmates who were found to be not suitable by the parole board because the panel stated that they were confused about their identity. And what is the difference between proof of identity for a person who is normal by society's standards compared to a person who identifies as something different from their gender at birth.

But why does the justice system tell that transgender is not an individual sexual orientation. We get used to the norms of society so why does the boundary between gender and sex become blurred in an environment like this, like prison? Why has the word sexism turned into genderism based on the idea that everybody's gendered oppression should match their sex. We are encouraged by the parole board, and I've been to the parole board three times, and we are encouraged by the parole board to gain insight on our self, so why do people who define themselves as transgender become paralyzed and penalized for it. They have a fear to even want to go in there and even speak their truth. And that label of being transgender, which defines the individual as different, the system should train, educate, and accommodate the different ways individuals use self-identity. The system, officers, and inmates need to broaden their understanding of the categorization related to inequality and how can they understand the experience of an individual through an intersectional lens if they will not even try.

Moni: OK. I don't -- for the life of me, I could not understand in the prison -- you might not necessarily have the language of intersectionality but you can see it by who is in the and the things that that we all have in common. In Illinois Department of Corrections, when I first got to IDOC, the majority of us were Black, most of us came from poor places whether we were from

white rural Illinois or the Chicago Metropolitan area, and we also had so many other common themes and experiences of violence, gendered violence, domestic violence, mental wellness issue stemming from trauma, from all the violence, addiction issues and things like this, varying levels and degrees of disability, all these different kinds of things so we know what it is, you know? So it is really just like catching up language, I guess I want to say. We are just like catching up language of vocabulary. The best way I put it is we are talking about a lot of the same things in prison that we talk about out here just kind of differently. Maybe not necessarily as proper and there may or may not be a whole lot of cussing but we are talking about a lot of the same things. Watching especially like -- for change in the population as laws changed out here, right? But we always know that that's the. So navigating through that -- am I making sense?

Mariame: Absolutely. Yeah, keep going.

Moni: And so, if we have got something going on -- say when I was new in the prison and didn't know shit and just coming from the county. I got to the prison and my out date was like a gazillion years away, I knew nothing about prison, I knew what heard but I hadn't actually been in the prison yet, I was just getting there. It is having other folks that were not necessarily from the same place but they know I am trying find out about this, that or the other. Who to drop a referral to to see a counselor or get in school, all the different things - and what type of school program is going to be better for you? Do you want an apprenticeship or go into something academic? This was back when we had programs. It is having that kind of understanding, right? That's what I have got. You have to know -- you have to be able to know when you can move around, and when somebody else can move around in the prison and how. That's what intersectionality means to me in the context of just being in the prison. I can't get this prison job over here for whatever reasons, you know, but so and so can and we need so and so to have that job over there; you know?

Mariame: Yeah. I really appreciated what you said, Monica, about - that you had conversations, basically, about concepts like intersectionality or even abolition on the inside but you may have been having those conversations just using different language, right? Language that meant something to you and meant something to your comrades on the inside and your friends and the people you got to know and your community on the inside. You were having these conversations already in your own language and in your own way understanding it that way and I think that is a lesson for all of us that language, while important, as a marker and a way for us to find ways to understand each other, it is not everything; right? You can still convey similar ideas using new terms.

For me, the interesting parts of intersectionality are less this concept of identity and more this concept that certain forces of oppression combine to create new forms of suffering. That's the thing, at least for me, in the way that Kimberle Crenshaw talked initially about intersectionality that attracted me. It was that our identities are important, of course, but so are -- Monica, you may want to mute yourself because I can hear your background noises - But anyway, our identities are important but so are the social locations that we inhabit that are connected to those identities and the reality is that our identities are not actually fixed. They shift and they change even as our social locations sometimes stay the same because of oppression. And so I just like to remind myself all of the time that while our identities shape our politics, they are not

determinative of our politics and that means to me is that we have to find ways together to struggle and fight together and that while our identities matter, they are not the only thing. We have to find a politics that we can agree to and that will give us a foundation from which we can actually struggle. This is called Study and Struggle and to me it is not an accident that those two things come together. It is a big part of an abolitionist politic to study so that we understand through political and popular education, you know, what these concepts are. I think it was Amber who said that she was learning, she read the Combahee River Collective statement while incarcerated. That study portion of trying to grasp for new ideas and new ways to understand your circumstances when locked up is mirrored by those of us who are on the outside who are trying to study a politics to understand it in order to be better at struggle, to be more informed about the questions that we ought to be asking, to give ourselves some direction and a sense of what we are actually doing together in order to get free. So I think to me intersectionality is, you know, it is a term that's been given to a set of ideas that people have been expressing in different ways for a very long time but it is not the only thing. You know, there are other frameworks for also defining ourselves and also understanding the world. So I take the parts of intersectionality that really, you know, hit me particularly in the, you know, kind of solar plex, you know the plexus whatever they call it which is that concept of forces of oppression combining to create new forms of suffering and the question then becomes how all of these different forms of discrimination act together to limit your likelihood to be able to live a livable life, right? A lot of what intersectionality helps us understand is why some of us have a more likelihood of having our lives shortened by just living in the world. The forces of oppression that kind of, you know, make it so that our social locations trap us in particular ways and then those things combining to create new forms of suffering. Anyway, I think a lot about that when I think about intersectionality and it's -- its uses and usefulness to us in struggle. Monica, do you have something else that you want to add or do you want us to move to the next clip?

Moni: I am just completely in agreement with you. I understood intersectionality as those things that is stepping on everybody's neck - maybe in a different way and to different degrees - but that is what it is when all these different systems of oppression are just strangling folks from 52 different directions. Thank you so much and we can go to the next.

Care:

Garrett (Interviewer): So you brought up this this quote, it's Saidiya Hartman talking about Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake*: "care is the antidote to violence." Do you want to talk about what that phrase means to you a bit?

Tank Sherrill: I mean, for one, you know, I committed a violent act. And so, and it was acted upon my own friends and my own community. I did harm to my own community, a community I had sworn to always protect and love and cherish, right? And so to actually have my friend's mother, during the sentencing phase, tell me that she forgives me, and that she loves me. That right there was the highest form of care that I could receive. Because, from that point on, I started caring for myself. And that was the beginning for me to actually, approach how to do time. How to come inside prison and do time. Cause I took all that I knew, that I learned on the streets in the structural gang culture, and came up in here, and just added ten fold to the toxic culture that already exists inside the prison. And so that care allowed me to care for myself, which allowed me to care for others. And that right there is the antidote, you know, is a healing

balm, against violence. And from that we formed a group that was called HEAL: Healing Education and Accountability for Liberation, which was based on restorative justice principles. Where care is at the center. So that right there, that quote really resonated with me. Because I've lived that. I've been you know, graced with that care.

Amber: It's really common to you know, cook together in prison. In the men's prison, it's called putting together a spread. Here, it doesn't really have a name, it's just something that happens. So one of the things with that is we get these small white cereal bowls, they're paper cereal bowls, right? Each morning for breakfast for putting our breakfast in.

So what a lot of people end up doing is they'll use those as being like here, have a single serving of this thing I cooked, right? And it's just like the gift that keeps going back and forth and around all over of, you'll intentionally cook 20% more than you're actually gonna eat, and then pass it off to two or three people, just because. You know what? A full belly of something that tastes good just makes your whole day better. And that's something that everyone seems to recognize.

Other things, making a point of actually sitting with people when they're upset, instead of just being like, oh, I'm going to give you your space. You see both of those things happen in prison, but some people lean into it and some people flee in blind panic. That leaning in, is another way that that care and concern gets shown.

Even if you don't even really know a person. Like most of the people that I know really well, I know them really well because they were having a crisis, I leaned in and supported them in it, and then we were friends afterwards.

Let's see here, other ways... celebrating people's victories, like even the minor victories. Like even the minor victory, like we have literally thrown parties for people because they got into their education program in the first place. And then we celebrate it again every time they finish class. And then *really* really celebrate them once they graduate. Because you know, it doesn't really matter what the class is. It could be one of the bullshit offender change programs that don't actually really help people that DOC does, but it's still an excuse to celebrate people and taking those excuses is kind of a big deal. Because, life can get hard in here. We just had a week-long lock down due to COVID restrictions last week, and everybody was struggling. We got off that lockdown, you literally had people dancing on the tier because the lockdown was over. So it's things like that then help people to find that resilience just to keep pushing forward despite being incarcerated.

Mariame: Thank you so much. Thank you so much to Tank and to Amber I think it was who were speaking to the concept of care. The questioner asked Tank a question based on something that Saidiya Hartman had said at an event that was celebrating Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake* when it first came out a few years ago. She said care is the antidote to violence. And I think I would certainly agree that care is an antidote to violence not the only one, obviously, there are many other kinds of potential antidotes to violence but I do think care can be one of them though some people would disagree. In my concept of a liberatory framework of care I do

think it can be an antidote to violence. I would also say that I have been thinking a lot about care for a long time. I am interested in how care is made possible in repressive and unfree spaces and in that way prisons have a lot to teach us about care work and how people care for each other within those very violent repressive spaces that they do that in spite and maybe also because of those things. I think a lot about that. And also, in the clip, Amber talked about COVID. The global pandemic and the impact that the global impact has had on people on the inside is devastating. It has had a devastating impact in general. Almost over 650,000 people in the U.S. alone killed by the virus. And then millions of people around the world dead from this global pandemic. I had thought maybe at the beginning that, I guess, you know, I have been asking myself is it strange to be interested in the ideas of collective care during the time when it is apparent that people, not many, but some people, a good number of people don't desire to take care? They don't desire to take care of themselves? And even to take care of those closest to them? The thing we are seeing with these pushbacks to wearing masks and to getting a vaccine and getting a vaccine. Is it that care means something different to those people? Perhaps... what does it mean to people. For me, care has always meant to keep myself and to keep others alive with consent; right? The key part is with consent from them if I am talking about other people. To keep alive. Right now it is, in a strange way, this type of care feels illusive and yet in other places really abundant. We have seen it with the way that mutual aid has been activated during this global pandemic. This kind of collective caring. Then we have seen it on the other side with this elusiveness of the people who are refusing to take care or don't seem to have a desire to take care. What does that all mean? What does that all mean when we are talking about our folks on the inside and the brutality of those spaces and them making a way with very little way. I wonder, Moni, if you could speak, and I know you have thought about this concept and more than that, you've lived this concept. Can you speak to your thoughts about care? I kind of went all over the map because I am all over the map right now, in thinking about the connections between inside and outside in care. I am interested in your thoughts.

Moni: OK. I think, I know you are absolutely right. We take care of each other in prison because of prison and in spite of prison. We are taking care of each other because of prison and in spite of prison. As an example, this extends to all different kinds of things, right? It extends to all different kinds of things. I used to make soup all of the time. One of the big staples I think in every prison there is probably noodles. The ramen noodles. If you have a hookup in the kitchen you can dress them up a little bit. If someone is going through something, it is one of the things we can't do anything about like sometimes someone snaps out because "I want to go the fuck home!" We can't do anything about that. But we can sit with you and be with you and be some kind of... if maybe not a comfort but you just know you are not in there by yourself feeling this kind of way, so somebody will cook something. This is just what happens, right? It is - I think care is, and I think I have talked about this before in other places, taking care is refusing to abandon; right? And so, when I have heard and read Ruth Wilson Gilmore talking about organized abandonment and other folks talk about a deliberate disinvestment from poor communities and poor communities of color and I am like so? Where all us wind up is in the prison. If we care for each other whether that's making soup or coffee or you crying with somebody because you're just mad because you got shook down for the 10th time in one month, all of these things are taking care. It is also helping each other with legal work. Helping someone write a PLA or post-conviction or clemency. It is doing someone's hair because they are fixing to get that visit when reunification rights come. It's all those things. It is the natural things we do

every day. But it is also the ones that we coordinate with each other. So like on different holidays, there will be double shops. Commissary will shutdown and we know it will shut down so they will allow us to spend twice as much money and buy twice as much stuff and sometimes there is extra Christmas items or whatever. And there is always gonna be some folks who don't shop. People who do, we get with each other and everybody else to make sure everybody's got something. You know what I am saying? It is the way especially for like people who have gotten really, really close, we all have each other's mom's phone numbers or our partners or somebody from out here, we have somebody else's phone number from out here so if one of us come up missing we can call out and be like this is what's going on. We need some fucking help. I don't know how many times we have written down on little tiny ass pieces of paper, write down Uptown People's Law Center, they can help. It is all of those things.

Care is, I have spoken of this one before, one of the women, she was a long timer, and a baby when she got locked up. She committed suicide. And I don't even like saying that shit. She was murdered by suicide and IODC is what the fuck happened because they wouldn't let us care for her. This care extends to people who are in extreme mental crisis that may be in tune with another reality so you are there with them while they are in tune someplace else and someone else is running interference, whatever correctional staff, so they don't take one of us and throw us in a strip cell. Not everybody comes back from those and not everybody comes back from those the same. We are not trying to have somebody go for a psych eval and a strip cell and all that when all they need is an hour and somebody to keep them company.

It is -- I took a meditation class while I was locked up. This was while I was in Lincoln. We wound up with some pretty interesting programs and had a meditation teacher and was pretty cool. He was explaining like mindfulness to us in a way that he just thought like we could not understand the concept. Taking care is being mindful. I don't really differentiate between the two. In the prison, and one of the prisons I was in, we had a seven-man shower. There is like maybe 18 inches of space between the showerheads. And there are seven of them in there. So taking care, this mindfulness means that only three people are going to get in the shower so everybody has a little space; right? And this taking care means that if that fourth person tries to come and it is like no, you don't see us here? You know? This taking care, this mindfulness, it is literally making sure people have the things they need or coming as close as we can to making that shit happen. It is making sure people respect other people. That shit is not always easy. Like I talk a lot of good stuff about prison but a lot of ugly shit happens too. Taking care extends to the ways that we deal with harm and hurt when it happens. You know? That hurt and harm doesn't just happen to that one person. Even though one person might have a black eye but the whole mother fucking housing unit is going to get shutdown and shook down and other shit. It is getting with folks to say you hurting everybody and you too because we will quit fucking with you and cut it out but it means because we know because we here and we have been here and we did that too, we have fucked up too. It is giving somebody a chance to not keep fucking up and giving someone a chance to make it right, to repair the harm. We have already been thrown away. I think by and large we are not too keen on throwing folks away. We might quit fucking with you for a minute, you know what I am saying? One of the things when I say don't throw people away that doesn't mean where you have been hurt or harmed really, really bad that doesn't mean -- you are still in community with folks but being in community does not necessarily mean you got to be right upside somebody's head when they have hurt you. You know what I am

saying? Like it is OK to give somebody 50-feet, you know what I am saying? We understand that. What will happen is because you can't necessarily move around. It is not like you can be like I am going to go here in the prison. You are either going to get transferred when you don't want to, right? Or something like that. But sometimes, we can find a way where if two people cannot be in the same space, we going to work it out where these two people aren't going to be in the same space without going to seg, without going to solitary confinement. It is finding and making a way to work some shit out especially in the prison. Am I making any sense?

Mariame: Absolutely. You are making total sense and just sharing so many gems about, you know, the experience, your experience, and what people should takeaway. I am going to just read a very short poem that I really love that to me encapsulates part of what care means when we are talking about inside-outside. I think you can mute yourself, Moni, just so I don't get the feedback. After this we will move to Sean to get to the last couple clips.

This is a poem by Jimmy Santiago Baca called Letters Come to Prison. Very short. Written 1976, Arizona state prison, Florence, Arizona.

From the cold hands of guards
Flocks of white doves
Handed to us through the bars,
Our hands like nests hold them
As we unfold the wings
They crash upward through
Layers of ice around our hearts,
Cracking crisply
As we leave our shells
And fly over the waves of fresh words,
Gliding softly on top of the world
Flapping our wings for the lost horizon

I really love that poem for lots of reasons. The imagery is beautiful. It is really short, to the point, but one of the main reasons that I have done work over the many years that I have been doing anti-criminalization work in terms of both having letter writing events to our folks on the inside but having a regular practice of writing letters myself. I have many, many pen pals now that I have accumulated over the years and my friend Vicki Law talks about this all of the time. She literally has to take time off to write to people. It is a labor, like I talked about at the beginning, a labor of these weaving of connections that can be really hard when you have a life that is full of other things you have to do but I so appreciate taking time, my writing is once a month on the last Sunday of every month I write my letters and I have done this as a practice for many, many years both to people who are my family who are on the inside and people who are loved ones that I have gotten to know and then pen pals who I have gotten to know. And I just think about those letters as small, material encapsulations of care. And how important letters are to folks on the inside for so many reasons that you know, Moni. And how important it is, and I hope for people who are listening, to this whatever time you are listening to it to just do that. To create those small material embodiments of care in those letters that we send to people on the inside and that they send to us and that offer care to us too. It is a reciprocal relationship, it's not a one

way relationship. I get as much or more out of my letters from my friends and family than they probably do from my very boring letters that I write about what I am doing on a day to day basis. Moni, do you have anything you want to add before we throw over the Sean?

Moni: No, I am going to refer back to this in a little but but it also goes with the next part so I don't right now.

Mariame: Sean, I think you are showing two clips in a row, right? Yeah.

Relationships:

Garrett: How does the prison dictate the types of relationships you can have with people outside as well as in?

April: Well, if you look at the formerly-incarcerated people, if they're on parole, you have to go through all these channels, just even have a communication or a relationship with them. The prison really really really is a stickler when it comes to that one.

A lot of people don't listen, there's not really a consequence. But they make it a point to let you know that you can't stay in contact with somebody who just paroled, so that kind of relationship gets strained for a lot of reasons. That person cannot come and visit you in court. Whatever the...and as far as like I'm a good example for even my attorneys, and going to board, my attorneys who have a legal right to come and visit me and prepare me for board have a hard time getting a visit. The prison will not answer the phone. Or one time I sat over there for three hours waiting and nobody showed up in the visiting room.

There's a lot of people in here who will lose family members, and the family will call to inform the inmate that their mother passed or their father passed. And the prison refuses to get that information to some people. So there is a middle block, there is a block there, that the prison does to influence the relationship between the incarcerated and the non-incarcerated.

Yeah, there's really nothing that we can do. We're like sitting ducks. There's nothing pretty much we can do but complain to the outside people, who are already have the problem getting in to us. So it's like we can complain as much as we can. And we can file grievances. We can take it up to you know maybe do an appeal or a writ, but it's really like a barrier. And the more that the fight out there, and the movement is happening out there, it makes it even harder to even get those conversations or even get that relationship between the outside and the inside.

It's like the administration has their own opinion. And if they don't like what the protestors or whoever it is out there is doing or whatever, they will make us lock down and they'll say institutional lockdown and lock us in our rooms until the protestors leave.

Because of that, like a camaraderie is born, with some of the women in here who really would not have spoken to each other before. You know, so when things like are like that where people see things like that, it kind of like, it kind of brings us together a little bit and makes us form our

own community, and makes us start to—that's how we end up coming up with different ways to help the transgender [prisoners] integrate you know so we start to form our communities to help each other get through it.

Garrett: So this next question, you talked a little bit about how Mariame in her book talks about the experimentation and how that's central to abolition. Could you talk a little bit about how experimentation has been significant to you inside?

Tank: Yeah, yeah, so just organizing of course DOC got policies in place, that lays out as far as the type of relationship we're supposed to have with people that come inside, that aid and assist us, right, those co-conspirators you could say. There's rules and guidelines laid out that say what they can and what they cannot do. And so, a person that, you know, have to be creative. We don't want, we don't want to jeopardize folks who want to get into this work. So the policy is saying we can't communicate with them then that's, we're not going to do that, right, we're not going to do that. However, you know what I'm saying, you can be creative. And I always say this, talk to your friends about the work that we're doing and of course, people want to experience this themselves, they've never been inside a prison and they hear the testimony from their friends, or from their colleagues, coming inside prison and doing this work, and they want to come inside. And I say this: talk to them about the work that we're doing and give them this option. Give them this option. Let them know the work we're doing and how we need allies that can actually stay out there. And don't come inside. Where we run this risk, you know what I'm saying, of not being able to talk to them because of these rules. Right? And that person can be a hell of an ally out there, that I can call, that I can talk to, that I can get on the JPay and communicate with, that's not breaking no rules. But they're part of the community that we're developing, that we first imagined, and it came true. Now we're living this imagination. It's no longer imagination, it's reality. And so, I've been pretty successful with that. And so, that's one of the experiments you have to be willing to take. Being creative. Which is one of our principles at BPC. We follow the Kwanzaa principles. Kuumba, which means creativity. And so I tell this to brothers all the time, be creative. Always, be creative.

Amber: You have...You have to come together in order to be able to actually cause real change. No human being working alone has actually caused something real to exist. It's always been groups of people doing something. So we get this individualist narrative in America because the leader gets credit for everything that the group did.

Edison didn't actually invent a thousand different things. He had 10,000 people working for him, that invented a thousand different things. He put his name on every single one of them, right? Much the same can be said for Ford and every single one of our oil robber barons, and industrialists from that entire era, which is where this narrative of the individual really came into its fruition.

So we have to understand that we are not just individuals, spitting into the wind. We are interdependent on each other. It is only through a web of connection that we're actually able to lean on each other, organize together, come together and push back against the system, which is designed to break individuals but doesn't actually know how to deal with a group. So I think

that's like really a part of the key there. And that's also how the system itself keeps us from causing real change is that it has instituted a series of rules and regulations to interrupt that web of connection. I am not allowed to hug someone even when they're crying, because that is a 244-rule violation—public display of affection.

I am not allowed to be in written contact with someone who comes into the prison and helps organize because then that volunteer coming into the prison, doing organizing work, loses their volunteer badge and can no longer do the work. These are things that interrupt the web of connection. I mean, I'm a professional writer and I have to self-censor to get a lot of stuff out of the prison, and I have to be very creative about the way that I phrase things and present my arguments, because otherwise it never makes it out of the mail room. It doesn't make it out into the outside world. So a lot of times something horrible will happen and I can only speak to half of it because the web of connection, communication, interdependence, and inter-reliance is inherently fractured by the rule system that they've put in place.

So, *You have 60 seconds remaining* Wow. That was fast. I think that's one of the things that is really important to match.

Garrett: Are you able to call me back? Do you have time?

Amber: Yes, there is no one line on the phone this morning so I can call back. Okay, awesome. We'll talk in one second then. Okay, great. Thanks.

“After a word from our sponsors.” [laughs]

Garrett: [laughs] All right. Talk soon.

Takeaways:

Amber: So there's a concept that I've been thinking of for a while, that I think gets missed when people are strategizing on where is it we're actually going to put our efforts. And I've been thinking of this category of things as bootstrap reforms, right? There's a lot of talk about wanting to make sure whatever changes we make are real reforms and not just reformist reforms, you know, change that makes change that doesn't actually fix anything.

So I think that a lot of things, particularly like opening up communication for inmates, getting rid of censorship, getting incarcerated people the vote, getting incarcerated people access to information, whether that's through a limited internet within the prison or things like that, these are all issues . . . You know, education is another one. These are all issues that get dismissed often by an abolitionist framework because they're not seen as actually causing change directly. They're not seen as like physically, directly shutting down a prison. Is this getting people out of prison? Is it giving people less time in prison?

Like that seems to be the checklist that anything that doesn't immediately meet those three criteria gets thrown out. I don't believe that works. We need more education in the prisons because otherwise how are prisoners going to know how to fight for ourselves or even how to speak to organizers on the outside when something like this comes up?

I mean, I wouldn't know what to talk about without the education department. I'm smart. I'm well read, but I needed that classroom setting to actually understand what these things mean. I don't have the vote. That means I can write letters to my congressmen and my senators and my governor all day freaking long. But there's zero reason for them to even open the envelope. I can't vote, which means I can't vote against them. So why are they going to listen to me?

Now, back to the communication point: if I can't freely communicate the actual conditions of prison, then how are organizers on the outside actually able to carry that football forward and cause real change the way that it needs to be, and really say, you know, "How about we not use cruel, unusual punishment, like extended periods in isolation, because I dunno maybe that causes some mental health issues?" Right?

Like when you're speaking about staff misconduct within the prison, when you're speaking about abuses that happened by the system. Like, these are all things that need to be fought for because they allow us to fight the larger war in a better way, in a more enlightened way. And honestly, it makes those other battles easier. So I think that's something that's often missed.

Moni: Hey. So we need more programs in prison, absolutely. Absolutely. I know this is like a theme for some folks. It is also a theme for some folks in prison and here is why. I have been in prison when we had what we would deem a lot of programs, like three classes a week but I have also been in prison when we didn't have nothing. If you didn't have some kind of job assignment or were not in an A, B class there was nothing. But the programming that there is always in prison is church. This is not necessarily a bad thing. But I am going to ask you to go ahead and read that case O'lonc vs. Shabazz, for a little more context. Prisons have absolute control over the people. Absolutely. This is all the way down to how you pray. There is not a lot of educational -- there is an abundance of church program and the problem with the church programming is it tends to reinforce the rightness of the state. It entirely reinforces the rightness of the state. Literally. You can go to almost any church service and the person is going to tell you that God sent the police to bring you into the prison; right? And so I can't tell you how many times I have seen folks come back from church crying, the place that's supposed to make you feel better and you crying because you are wretched and gay and mentally unwell and addicted but prison is going to save you from the wretchedness that's you. I think this is -- I think obscene is not a strong enough word for that. I think obscene is not even a strong enough word for that. Having spaces in the in the prison that are not that where you can think with some other folks about some things and ask questions and learn some stuff and learn it with other people I think that is so incredibly important. I can't tell you how much time I have spent in prison trying to push back on this idea that prison saved my life. And I've actually said these words, prisons saved my life. It was never the actual prison. It was people I met in prison. Folks that I met in prison that had my back that took care with me. You know what I am saying? It wasn't -- the prison is not -- it presents itself as this beneficial benevolent theme that's like benign that

happens to be there in case we need it. It is obscene and just preverse as fuck. And so to have other programs in there... and I have been in some of those bullshit programs too. But some of them weren't bullshit or maybe they started out to be but this is why they are not bullshit -- at the end of the day, at least, they get you out of your cell for a minute so you can pass a kite to your wife or friend or something, you might get fresh air for a minute or something like that and that is absolutely essential too because passing that kite is just as important as that actual class. That five minute walk from your cell to the school building? That's important. I can't even stress to you how important that is. What I am asking is like if you can pass a background check go teach you a class of some kind in the prison. Do poetry workshops and theater workshops. If you got a PhD go teach something. But go. We need that in such a way so we can catch up our vocabulary. But really to have that space where -- I don't even know how to explain this for real but to have that space where we can just be a little less in prison if that makes sense.

Mariame: Absolutely.

Moni: Go ahead.

Mariame: Feel free to keep going.

Moni: I think, oh man. There is so much to this. I think all of this to me; taking care is abolition. If you are mindful your gonna come to the conclusion of abolition. If you are really serious about taking care, the world we live in now, we got to take care of each other despite the world we live in and we supposed to be living in a world where it's one in the same. We understand that if you ain't good I ain't good and so on. Right now we are almost always at war all of the time. You know what I am saying? Another thing I want to push back on, is like, it's a lot to even get into a prison. I know that for folks that go teach in the prison and stuff like that, that's a lot. The prisons are all a gazillion miles away here in Illinois, zillion miles away from Chicago, but the idea that it lends to the institution - maybe it does! - but we are still in there! There is still people in prison right fucking now. So if you can, of course, write people in prison but go see people, teach a class, give people something to do, something else to do -- I can't say how important that is. The violence that is prison is we can write books and books and books and unless you there you will never really really gonna know. I genuinely genuinely wish and hope nobody else ever has to know. There is enough of us. There is already enough of us. I lost my train of thought and it was a particular theme... there is a thing Amber said that I want to address. Oh! Back to programs. This happens in the prison and it is because of the manufactured scarcity of the prison, where there is pushback on people trying to go to programs for different reasons. You might have someone going to the drug treatment program and the next person is like they only going so they can get the days. We call it good time, it's called different things in other prisons. Depending on your crime or conviction you can get some time off your sentence for going to the drug unit or other different things, other programs. There is always this, well why are you going? You are only going for the days or different church events. Or, what are you going for? You ain't supposed to be in the because you gay. This kind of competition that is created by this manufactured scarcity. And so, as many folks that can go into the prison and do something? Please go. Please go. Go ahead.

Mariame: Just saying yes. Yes. It make a lot of sense. I have done prison programs over the years, organized them, particularly in juvenile prisons, and detention centers, and yeah. They are hard. They are hard. There is a lot to say about that and maybe it is another day. I know we have time for questions. If there are questions to us, please, share them with us so we can answer them.

Moni: You can write to somebody in your prison, get to know other abolitionists in your area, Jacob.

Mariame: Can you speak the question out so everybody can hear it?

Moni: Oh, yeah. So Jacob Watkins is asking what are beginning steps we as early stage abolitionists can take to build relationships with comrades on the inside in our local communities?

Mariame: Yeah. And what was your response, Moni?

Moni: To get to know some abolitionists in his local community and write to some folks in prison.

Mariame: Yeah, absolutely. I do want to say something about how hard it is maybe for some people to get connected to folks on the inside. There is actually so many of us who are in some way connected to incarcerated people but you know, one thing I don't want to take for granted is like, finding people is not -- finding people to connect with is not always easy. I want to offer that if folks can put into the chat on YouTube, I created at the beginning of this year, nine solidarity commitments to and with incarcerated people, a list of nine commitments people should take in 2021 that can be directly impactful the lives of incarcerated people and one thing I say is letter writing but I don't just say letter writing, I put links to organizations that offer people connections to pen pals on the inside. I will -- if people can't find that I will make sure that's available to you, Jacob, so you can easily find a person that way to connect with. Yeah. Next question on here. Moni, can you mute? I am getting feedback. Thank you. [The question] "I do a music recording program in a prison in Portland, Oregon and I was let in and now locked out again. What are some ways I can support the guys inside? Also, I am tempted to but afraid to push DOC boundaries and parallel by program. What are your thoughts on that?" This is a question I did not necessarily want to get into tonight because it isn't actually that easy to get inside prisons or jails and do work. I know that from personal experience. Oftentimes you need so many connections to get in. You need to know a person, they make you jump through so many hoops, if you've got volunteers you are trying to bring in, there are background checks people have to go through, it is really not easy. They do that on purpose because as I mentioned at the beginning, prison is a rupture and they are trying to make sure that people don't get inside. You have to work really hard to get inside and then you have to work really hard to stay inside. That's where the problems lie. The staying inside part. If you are running a project or a program and some egregious things are going on and you speak out on that, you risk imperiling your program and getting your program kicked out of the prison but like are you ethically, is it OK to just shut up when there are horrible things going on? You know? It isn't that easy. I think we have to have honest conversations about what it is we are trying to do when we are in those

spaces. We ended up stopping a program that we really wanted to keep in a juvenile detention center just because it was so -- they were so egregiously like against what we were trying to do with the actual program and treating the young people that were inside there. We just couldn't continue to have our program in good faith. We had to leave. It really becomes a thing where you have to go back and forth. We explained why we couldn't come back to the young people. They were sad but totally understood and were in support of us because they were being punished and told they couldn't come to program when the whole point was to have the program and not to keep people out particularly the people who needed that space the most. It is not easy. I would just say that you have to be very -- you have to make a decision you can live with. That would be my response, Nate. You have to have a decision that you can live with. I think the next question, Moni, is for you.

Moni: Absolutely, Stephen. This is totally possible out here. It is totally possible out here.

Mariame: Repeat the question so people can hear.

Moni: Oh, I am sorry.

Mariame: That's OK.

Moni: "You and your comrades treated a community that would address harm and avoid violence. Is that kind of community possible outside?" Yes, absolutely. It is absolutely possible. In fact, it happens all of the time. These things happen all of the time. We might not see it happen - because everything else that does happen, is like, everywhere, put out everywhere, right? But these things happen all the time. Any time that someone sees something where you just feel like it is going to go down and you just kind of divert away from that. You just grab somebody real quick and are like want to go grab a cup of coffee or whatever it is? These things happen all of the time. These things happen all of the time. There is like -- when I was growing up, my mom and dad had a sometimes violent relationship. Every so often I would go stay with one of my grandparents for a couple weeks or my auntie for a month or so. That's a way of keeping me from harm and for them to work their stuff out. These things happen all of the time, it is absolutely possible. What can happen is that we can better resource the stuff that is happening and create more. But yeah, it is absolutely possible. It happens every day.

Mariame: Wonderful. Are there other questions? Let me see. I think those are the questions that I see on the page. We are almost at time. Moni, do you want to end with some thoughts to close? And then I will go after you.

Moni: Yes, with regard to violence, right, people that are locked up for violent crimes, for violent incidences, I was listening to Tank, right? A couple of things. One, when we talk about this kinds of violence, there is so many assumptions that when it does happen, people are not sorrowful or regretful or remorseful and that couldn't be further from the fucking truth. There is so much of that sorrow, regret and remorse that moves people to care for the way they do in prison. That's the thing that moves people to try to be there for other people. And this goes to the fact that, by and large, you can check any set of numbers you want. Fact check me. People that were locked up for violent crimes are the least likely people to return to prison on either a

technical violation or a new case. Right? Versus people that are locked up for non-violent crimes that are largely either drug case or whatever case relating to drugs, right? Addiction and mental wellness. What I think is happening here is that long timers, we learned a different way, a newer way of coping that all them rehab programs and shit they be throwing in the prison and bullshit programs have not figured out, right? And this is from the care we take with each other. A lot of what happens is we are there for the people that come and go from the prison. There is a kind of like -- a little bit of anger and envy to be honest because like why are you here again even though we know after sitting the for so long we know what people are up against. We don't really know until we get out here but we got a good fucking idea because we keep seeing the same folks come back and the same folks come back. We try to do our best to take care of them while they're here in the prison with us and worry like a mug while they're gone because we know where they going. You know? It creates -- it can create this incredibly false divide between the people that are the because we are looking at folks like so and so is violent versus so and so who isn't when the actual violence is totally created by the prison. It is completely created by the prison, by the PIC, capitalism and by all of the stuff. When we talk about violence, we have to talk about that whole team. Not just the the one incident that sent someone to prison. I want to say this is Danielle Sered and I am going to paraphrase it poor but no one enters violence for the first time by committing it. I am probably saying it wrong.

Mariame: Yup, that's right.

Moni: It is exactly that for everyone in the prison. Just because someone is there for a violent crime does not mean they did the thing and even if they did I can tell you, I can promise you on everything, if people -- if there was a do-over button that you could push and go back and undue -- undo shit that's exactly what people would do. When we are talking about violence it is knowing that everyone is capable of it for real. And two, that's not all a person is in prison. Like they say in treatment language, once an addict always an addict. I personally don't believe that bullshit either. Whatever got someone locked up that is not all they are. That's just one moment out of their lives. And there is always remembering that and remembering like actual violence is the whole system that created this whole thing.

Mariame: Thank you so much, Moni. That's so powerful and so real. I really don't have much to add. I just want to thank everybody for joining today. Thank you to all the organizers. Thank you to the wonderful interpreters and the captioner. We appreciate you. I want to just take one moment to uplift the fact that there is so much wonderful work that's being published by incarcerated people -- Moni, can you put yourself on mute for a second? Sorry. I am hearing the feedback again. Yeah, I just want to give a heads up to folks to, please, go ahead and start a study group. Use the Study and Struggle materials to start a study group, an inside-outside one. I would also say there is a wonderful kind of zine out called In the Belly which is something Stevie Wilson and other folks on the inside put together. It is for abolitionist incarcerated folks. I want to encourage people to subscribe to their Patreon so you can get direct information, direct ideas, the intellectual thinking and labor that incarcerated people do is critical to your movements and I am just so glad that we got to be in conversation with Amber, April and Tank today and always so grateful to be in conversation with Moni Cosby. Thank you for being here tonight. Take care.

Moni: Thank you all so much. Thank you.