

Why abolition now? Reflecting on 2020 with scholar-activists Brianna Byrd, Camilla Hawthorne, and Dylan Rodriguez California Economists Collective¹

Keywords: abolition, police, care, scholar-activism, looting, philanthropy

Introduction

In late 2020, the California Economists Collective (CEC) sat down with Brianna Byrd, Camilla Hawthorne, and Dylan Rodriguez to reflect on the mobilizations for Black life that exploded in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, a movement which the *New York Times* has speculated may be the largest, by protest numbers, in United States history (Buchanan, Bui and Patel, 2020).

CEC asked Byrd, Hawthorne, and Rodriguez to reflect on their scholar-activism as abolitionists. While CEC interviewed each one-on-one, below we have integrated the transcripts thematically, which we believe adds additional insight across the topics. (The interviews were filmed and will also be part of a multi-media project by the same name.)

The conversations are structured as follows: (1) Scholar-Activist Profiles, (2) The Police as a Capitalist Institution, (3) Abolition Now, (4) Pedagogy and Spaces of Abolition, (5) Reparations, 'Looting,' and Philanthropy, and (6) What Is (Next) to be Done?

Scholar-Activist Profiles

California Economists Collective

Can you please introduce yourself in a few sentences?

Brianna Byrd

My name is Brianna Byrd. I'm a Feminist Studies PhD Student, and I study practices of care in the midst of situations of apocalypse. And I basically situate apocalypse to be a series of encounters with racial violence and settler

¹ The California Economists Collective members involved in conducting interviews include Ian Ross Baran, Kenton Card, Grecia Perez, and James Sirigotis. Additional support from Katie Butterfield, Bernadette Austin, Araceli Moreno, Hayley Steele, Tyler Brown, and Marcus Renner.

colonialism. I'm really interested in this particular year of 2020, of course, as there's been a lot of interactions between the state and people of color. And I center Black² women's narratives, in that search for: *How do we take care of ourselves?*

Camilla Hawthorne

My name is Camilla Hawthorne. I'm an Assistant Professor in Sociology and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies at UC Santa Cruz. I moved to Santa Cruz after finishing my PhD in Geography and Science and Technology Studies at UC Berkeley. And my work broadly looks at questions of diasporic Blackness and the racial politics of citizenship in Southern Europe. And so my kind of intellectual and political commitments have taken me to Italy primarily, where I have been doing the majority of my work and political activism since 2012.

Dylan Rodriguez

I'm Dylan Rodriguez. I'm a faculty member in the UC system at the Riverside campus. I've been doing different forms of pedagogy, organizing work, activism intervention, insurgency, and rebellion, which is focused on the abolition of the US prison industrial complex and the carceral regime. I was one of the founding members of the Critical Resistance organizing collective, which started in the Bay Area and is now national and to an extent international. And I work in close partnership and affinity with all kinds of folks all over the place, especially people who are interested in undertaking an abolitionist politics and abolitionist struggle.

The police as a capitalist institution

CEC

Reflecting from across various campuses of the University of California in 2020, a year of global uprisings for Black life, could we begin by asking you to define the police and situate its role as an institution in capitalism?

Byrd

What is the police on and off campus in 2020? I think we understand it to be very much an extension of a white terrorist organization, a.k.a.³ the Ku Klux Klan. But I also think that on campus they represent the affiliation with the

² Editorial note. We capitalize Black throughout, following Harris (see 1993, p. 1710).

³ I.e. 'also known as.'

state. There is this way in which the university, UC in particular, portrays itself as a public institution, as a vanguard, a series of innovative places. But the police lurking around reminds us that all of their 'innovations' are for the state. And the state has always been at our expense as Black and brown folks.

I think what I'm hoping for this year is that more people understand police as protecting private property, not for safety, but at the expense of providing other means of safety. Policing, for me, really looks like the investment in control, rather than liberty and liberation. It's the control of how you walk, how you arrive in places. It's the surveillance of who can be in places. That culture can be passed on to students and passed on to community members. So it also inhibits our ability to trust in our neighbors and really be able to show up for one another kindly.

For example, think about the Resident Assistant⁴ system, where you have to report these fellow undergrads, whom for whatever reason, are drunk. Rather than center care practices of holistic healing, or therapy, they're disciplined before they can understand themselves in this way. That is not benefiting people of color. It's not benefiting folks going towards their true passions. But it's really going to maintain the status quo. So, policing looks like surveillance in and out of the classroom, and it looks like literal police, and it looks like all of the systems of control that we have at UC Santa Cruz: for example, to surveil our fellow students. So it looks like the regents, whom have nothing to do with education, but are overseeing us. Overseeing. *Do I have to spell it out for you?*

There was a *Vice* article about how during the COLA student protests of 2019-2020 the UC had deployed military surveillance, coordinated with the FBI to get technology to do so.⁵ And so we knew the whole time, very literally, that we were being watched.

But I think there were times in which we would feel like pretty down, our technology wouldn't work, and we would kind of convince ourselves that – this ain't that big of a deal. *Right? Like, we're not really up to no trouble? We're just students. You know? Oh, we did the respectable thing. We're sitting down in civil disobedient, non-violent protest. What is the need for this?* And I think what that surveillance has revealed to me over time – this is my first year in California – was just how synchronized and how conjoined this police state, surveillance state, and the UC are in just dealing with their everyday students.

Hawthorne

The police is an institution that exists to uphold a particular narrative about abstract 'public safety,' a narrative in which the violence we see is merely an

⁴ Editorial Note: Resident Assistants are hired by universities to enforce campus rules, especially for those living on campus.

⁵ I.e. 'Cost of Living Adjustment.' For the *Vice* article, see (Gurley, 2020).

aberration from the central mission of policing, which is supposedly the ‘general good.’ I am inspired by 400 years of Black feminist radical theorizing and action, understanding the police as an institution that – particularly in the US settler colonial context – came into being in its modern form, as a way to uphold property relations that reinforce the structures of racial capitalism and reproduce settler colonialism. So, I understand policing as an institution that exists to maintain racial capitalist hegemony, such that violence is baked into the institution, rather than something we can reform our way out of.

The role of the police on campus is inextricable from the functions that police serve outside of the university context. And when we're thinking about – “*Why are we talking about abolishing UCPD?*” – it is because there are very similar structural problems and critiques with both institutions. For example, in the city of Santa Cruz, we know that the number of calls that police respond to that are actual emergencies, in which people's lives are in danger, is miniscule.

The uprisings of 2020 have been really inspiring because I think it's suggesting that when we shift a focus away from the logics of punishment and retaliation. “Where life is precious, life is precious.”⁶ There are other kinds of possibilities for us to relate to one another. And I think that often when we take policing for granted as an institution, we come to look at our community members as potential sources of danger. And when we start to look at the police as the actual sources of danger, and each other as sites of community building and connection, there're beautiful possibilities that emerge from that.

Again, I also think an important dimension of policing is the work that it does to maintain private property relations and regulate access to space. Particularly in a community like Santa Cruz with such a large unhoused population, so much of the police's effort is about imposing a kind of forced mobility on unhoused people. In light of this, the possibilities of reclaiming space and reclaiming a kind of commons is really powerful. When you know land is a common resource, and the privatization of land is not being maintained by armed agents of the state, once you sort of open up that box, there are a whole lot of really exciting possibilities for social relations.

Rodriguez

What we're seeing in the summer of 2020 moving forward are localized and global rebellions against policing. As such, these are rebellions, insurgencies, demonstrations and for that matter, kind of counter-warfare against the police that recognizes that its foundational structure of existence is premised on,

⁶ A phrase used by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, e.g. see Kushner (2019).

particularly, the evisceration, the policing, the surveillance, and the selective terrorizing of Black people.

Policing as a foundationally anti-Black institution. It is also tied into and closely linked with colonization. A conquest of heteronormative patriarchy, transphobia, and other forms of oppression is foundationally an anti-Black chattel institution. It is a direct outgrowth of the chattel institution in this hemisphere, meaning the Americas.

What I think we are seeing in this particular moment is a global rebellion against that logic of policing. It is not just against police. It is not just against police brutality. It's not merely against police killing or police violence. It is a rebellion that is at the bare minimum seeking to radically disestablish the police, and at its best is thinking about creative and collective new ways to abolish the police altogether in favor of other forms of community that are not premised on anti-Black policing and anti-Black violence.

The other thing I will say about the police as an institution is that it is inseparable from what I would call domestic warfare. This is not some kind of concoction of my imagination. It is exactly how the state, exactly how the police – for that matter: elected officials, district attorney, and popular culture – those voices announced the presence of police as a war making apparatus. The difference is that it is waging war on particular people, particular populations, particular geographies. And so, the problem with that is most folks don't want to recognize it as domestic war. Primarily because they imagine that the way the police are waging the domestic war is in service of them. And so we got to get our heads around how it is that in every structure of war it's also a cultural structure. There's a way that the waging of domestic war tries to convince as many people as possible that the war is being waged on their behalf.

Now, we need to be analytical about that. We need to understand how it is that policing is primarily intended to service racial capitalism. It's intended historically to service white men, propertied white people. It's intended to service those people who are in positions of authority: who have class power, who have state power, and so forth. It is there to kind of reproduce a particular social order, over and against the potential and actual rebellions of those who are oppressed by the same social order. So it's a state of war.

Anytime you have the police, it is an actual state of domestic war. And so what that then calls on us to do is, number one, recognize it as such. We recognize it as domestic war. Once we do that, it should alter everything we do in terms of how we recognize, talk about, and organize against the violence of that structure. You don't reform domestic war. You can maybe defund domestic war if you're really good about getting a redistribution of where that militarized infrastructure and resources are going to go. But really, the only thing you can really do with domestic war is end it. Or in other terms, abolish it, liberate yourself from it, and exterminate it. That to me is what the policing actually is:

foundationally anti-Blackness, foundationally and persistently a structure of domestic war.

Abolition Now

CEC

What is abolition and why abolition now?

Byrd

Abolition has a true history and allyship with insurrection. I really take to the practices of idols like Harriet Tubman whose trip transverse borders in order to provide freedom. For me, abolition is rooted in the true belief that your people will be free and you will move to do that. People are saying: “Enough of doing it alone.” We are ready to take on the mantle again of community care that settler colonialism stole from us by slavery, stole from us in the workplace.

Getting police off campus is like cutting off one of the heads of the hydra. If we can just get the police off campus right here, it's not going to get rid of the hydra, but it will definitely give us a means to slow it down until we can get more people to, for example, sue the school for accessibility. Just comfort all, just comfort everyone's net. And if money is the way you're talking, you owe a lot of people money. And we know that so many of the UCs are on stolen land – all of this, all of this – and the police help protect that right.

I'm excited to see through the Cops Off Campus campaign more conversations about policing, and also the histories of why we ‘need’ police in these environments. And if we can get to the root of that, we can start unpacking well: *Why does a university – who has targeted in advertising to 19 to 23 year olds – need armed guards?*

These sort of policing tactics build fear. Considering that they use the military to surveil us. I just want to point it out that I see a lot of parallels in the way that we're encouraged to be disciplined here through policing.

Hawthorne

What the data suggests is that if there's one predictor of murder at the hands of the police it is contact. It is contact between communities of color and unhoused communities with police that actually result in violence. On a very practical, statistical level, the way to reduce fatalities at the hands of police is to abolish police altogether. Because police are basically sanctioned to carry out violence on behalf of the state. And it's not something that can be regulated.

As for the question: *why abolition now?* In this particular moment, we've witnessed the ways in which, on so many different levels, institutions that are ostensibly about practicing care are actually reproductive of violence,

particularly against marginalized communities of color. And we saw this both with the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Institutions that are supposed to be carrying out this goal of care and public safety are actually resulting in anti-Black violence and death. And so I think that those contradictions have really come to the fore in a really powerful way, such that, the language of abolition has entered into the mainstream lexicon. It sort of unlocked people's radical imaginations in a way that really did not seem feasible before.

Abolition, as a project, is more than just abolishing police and abolishing prisons. I think in the US context that has become the focus or the starting point of abolition and abolitionist analysis because of the particular role that policing of prisons have played historically in upholding racial capitalism and settler colonialism. But when we read, especially Black feminist abolitionist work, we understand that carceral logics are tentacular in the ways that they reach out into so many other institutions: social services, education, and health care. This abolitionist framework, which starts with a kind of critical reconsideration of policing in prisons, necessarily then implicates all other institutions in our society.

I think one of the things – thinking again about how abolition is this capacious project that's not just limited to policing and prisons – that has been really inspiring are the conversations about mutual aid and community care that have not necessarily been a part of these discussions. I think about Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and other abolitionists, who talk about the fact that abolition is not just a negative project, but it's a positive project. *What are we actually building?* And it's these new systems of support and care that are really inspiring. I see them talking about strategy and movements. The way that these practices of care are playing out in the way that meetings are being organized, in the way that coalitions are being built, and the way that people are looking out for each other, the practice of bringing and distributing food at different events.

I've been really inspired by the conversations about the defunding of police. I think that they've been really important, rhetorically and politically, for making abolitionist ideas accessible. But I also think that it's important to understand that abolition is not just a matter of budgetary redistribution. That's an important starting point. And there's a whole host of other questions about how abolitionist politics relate to the state. I tend to have more anarchist leanings. An abolitionist vision is also one that is necessarily at odds with the state. Ultimately, it's about creating local networks that are democratic and consent based, but don't rely on downward redistribution of resources from the state.

Rodriguez

Abolition is a collective creative pedagogical tendency. I don't think it needs to be a mass movement. I certainly don't think abolition should or ought to be a vanguard. I think abolition is also a form, a method of waging Black liberation

guerrilla warfare. And thinking guerrilla warfare in all its rich totality from the pedagogical to the paramilitary, to the infrastructural, to the community building. Everything from flight to burning the fucking plantation down. These are all expressions and practices of guerilla war, abolitionist guerilla war within that tradition. So, I don't think it is useful to try to house or stuff this collective creative tendency, this collective pedagogical tendency of abolition, into some kind of pre-formulated social movement, mass movement, or vanguard box.

I want to affirm the fact that we are in a dangerous political moment. In part, because the term, concept, and rhetoric of abolition has in fact gotten so much momentum and traction now. What you see are fuckers that not that long ago were absolutely anti-abolitionist – were absolutely religious about their reformism, people who would laugh at you, pathologize you, denigrate you, even criminalize you, for pushing an abolitionist analysis and practice – are now jumping onto this conceptual rhetorical bandwagon and calling themselves abolitionists. That's a dangerous moment.

At the same time, it's also a beautiful moment because what that now means is that all these radical people, from the youth to the elderly, from across different communities, are following the example of Black-led, and Black radical abolitionist struggle that is unfolding before our very eyes. In our very presence folks are finding themselves invited into that political identity in a real way.

At the same time, we have the danger of folks expropriating and appropriating that term and deforming it and turning it into bullshit. You also have profound possibility: with crowds and crowds of all people who you would never expect who are curious. They are what you might call 'abolition curious.' There are other folks who are actually 'abolition proximate.' What they're struggling for, what they're thirsting for, is more community, more abolitionist community, more information, more analysis, more shared conversation.

There's a tension between the appropriating, liberalizing, hijackings of abolitionists' work. And then this kind of building critical mass of people that is deeply curious, and deeply, I think, committed to the notion that existing forms of reform – policy change, incremental institutional change – are not only insufficient, but they're actually part of the problem. Those things are actually part of what kills people.

The existence of jails, prisons, detention centers, youth facilities, facilities for people who are disabled, mentally ill, etc. That prison, carceral, jail, detention regime is the direct product of a spate of reforms that went the spectrum from the liberal left of conservative right. It was a bunch of reforms that were carried out through rigorous compromise, dialogue, and debate across that spectrum. Those things are the direct outcome of reform. So the thing that we're in now, the form of domestic war we're in now, is actually produced by reform.

This is what we need to understand when we're actually offering our support. I would say there's a phrase that a lot of abolitionists use – folks that are my teachers from Ruthie Gilmore and forward, Rachel Herzing over at Critical

Resistance and now Center for Political Education. They use the phrase ‘non-reformist reforms,’ which I find very useful.⁷ Recently I’ve also been kind of linking that to the idea of ‘abolition-friendly reforms,’ or ‘abolition-adjacent reforms.’ But again, that’s not an automatic. There’s nothing guaranteed about that. We have to have an abolitionist analysis.

The thing that remains persistent is that we have to wage a counter-war against reformism because reformism is actually the counterinsurgency. The leading edge of the counterinsurgency are all these people who want to either hijack the notion of abolition, and sneak into reformism, or be just explicitly reformers and want to tell you that the only possible change are changes to an existing system. That’s the counterinsurgency. And we’re in a moment of profound creative collective genius of actual insurgency that can transform all that shit.

Pedagogy and spaces of abolition

CEC

Reflecting on being a student or faculty member, in the classroom, on campus, and a scholar-activist, what role do universities play in this historical moment?

Byrd

I’ve been in a couple different pedagogy courses that have approached teaching as ethical instructors: taking the time to know your students, know the classroom, treat it as an engaging space, but also really following bell hook’s *Teaching to Transgress (1994)* and situating the classroom as a place of dynamic encounter with everyone. I was expecting the classroom to be a battlefield: like super racist all the time, coming up against everyone’s beliefs all the time, and still trying to educate, but not take offense and understand it’s not personal. However, teaching can contribute to a really awesome experience for the students, and centering Black and brown voices can be transformative, and create not a safe space, but a secure enough space for folks to still stay engaged. So I’m really excited to be engaging in pedagogies that are anti-racist and center Black feminist practices of care, because it seemed like it worked and was fun.

I think one of the ways that I’m trying to think with my professors and faculty and the Feminist Studies community is: *How can we allow folks to show up differently?* Considering everything being digital online during Covid-19

⁷ On non-reformist reforms see Berger, Kaba, and Stein (2017), and poster by Critical Resistance, “Reformist reforms vs. abolitionist steps to end imprisonment,” http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CR_abolitioniststeps_antiexpansion_2021_eng.pdf, Last accessed on 5/26/21.

lockdowns, and now that we're back in our home spaces, not knowing what people's home spaces look like. People not really caring structurally about how to make accommodations. I think that's also it: we have international students who are still having to show up for our three-hour seminars close to midnight.

I think the UC demands that you show up in a way that sacrifices your health. We've had many scholars go through that here. We had the "Academia Kills" banner here because of that. I remember one of the dining hall actions we had headstones of folks who have passed during their time as a scholar, or as affiliated, with diseases and complications during their time at UCSC. Stress kills. So I definitely think, in particular, we have to create ways of care.

Settler colonialists don't want you to be healthy. *Why would that be their goal?* They're not going to pay you for your healing.

Hawthorne

It's certainly complex being a faculty in this context. When I teach social theory classes, especially to undergrads, we read Antonio Gramsci, bell hooks, Marx, and Du Bois together, and we have a lot of conversations about social reproduction, ideological reproduction, ideological state apparatuses, the university as a site for the ideological reproduction of capitalism, what it means to actually use the classroom as a transgressive pedagogical space and whether or not that's possible. And so something that my students and I think about all the time: *Can we act within the confines of this institution?*

As much as you want to idealize the university, in many ways, it's a way of either warehousing surplus labor, a way of producing a particular kind of disciplined labor, or ideologically reproducing capitalism. Within that framework: *Can pedagogy still be transgressive? Can we actually do something radical in these classroom spaces?*

This quarter I've decided to teach my undergraduate senior seminar as a class on Black geographies and abolition. Teaching theoretical texts, activist texts. Connecting students to organizing that's happening on campus, as well as what's happening across the UC, with the understanding that political education is important. It's crucial to activism. If I can offer an opening then that's the best thing that I can do.

I think that there's a fundamental contradiction in the university, at least as we have idealized it as a space for promoting critical thinking and radical reimaginations of the world as it is and as it could be. And then there are violent crackdowns against students who are actually acting on, or putting into practice, that knowledge. There's a whole host of contradictions in terms of the university as a space of inquiry, the regulation of protest, that is actually politicizing that

pedagogical process, as well as the contradictions at the heart of the liberal discourse of free speech.

I've been using the language of radical imagination a lot. And that's because I've been in a lot of community meetings where it's become clear that the kind of 'there is no alternative' to neoliberal dogma has had this really stultifying effect on our ability to imagine a different kind of world. Or to only think about solutions within the framework of what already is. And this summer, I found so much inspiration in reading speculative fiction, especially Afro-futurist speculative fiction, both because by rendering the world slightly unfamiliar it denaturalizes the stuff in our existing world. But it also gives us a way to start doing a kind of creative imaginative act of world building that can then be a template for reimagining society. So I just think that reading fiction is actually really good political practice.

Rodriguez

What I think the moment of COVID-19 does is it brings disability justice to the center. I think a lot of us – including me, who historically had been by default ablest in all of our methods and strategies – are now compelled to place disability justice in a radical way. Not just an inclusive way, but in a radical way: meaning a liberation of the position of disability from all of those oppressive restrictions that are normalized in everyday life. That is now at the center of all forms of organizing under the conditions of the pandemic. It's going to change the way I organize for the rest of my life. We have to have disability access to all those things. So whether it's closed captions, whether it's ASL interpreters (American Sign Language), whether it's an analysis that is placed at the center of that teaching or that event.

So I think that's what this period has done. It raised the fact that even those forms of vulnerability – being immunocompromised vulnerability – are deeply racialized. They're deeply colonial. Black folks, native folks, trans folks, etc., are, as always, the most vulnerable to severe suffering and death. Over being immunocompromised, we see it now, in indisputable ways empirically. It's a disability constituted by all of these other forms of violence and power all the time.

CEC

How do dynamics of hierarchy and leadership play out?

Rodriguez

The best elders will step back. They'll say: "There needs to be some other voices at the table right now because y'all heard my wisdom. As an elder I've got my capacities and skill set. I've also got my limitations." And the most ethical elders

that I've ever worked with, and who I try to emulate, are very reflexive. They're very analytical. They are very self-aware. And they look at the room and they say, "We don't want to become hegemonic here. We want to take leadership and responsibility, but we don't want to become hegemonic." That's the difference. And so it's a tense play between these things: between who steps forward and who steps back, between the need for leadership and the need to take responsibility for leadership, and then the need to cede the position to other kinds of voices.

I do think that there's an obligation and responsibility for folks who have the analysis and experience to intervene on things that might be slipping back into reformism. To be honest, I find myself doing that a lot with folks that are well meaning, and that identify themselves as on the road toward being abolitionists, but who don't identify as such. The only formula folks are raised with is a reformist formula. They're raised with the notion that the way you deal with the police is to form yet another fucking Community Review Board. The way you deal with the anti-blackness of the UCR Police Department over the last 60 years is to form another task force on campus safety that presumes the existence of the police. And then folks buy into it: "Well I feel like we need to be at that table." *What if being at a table lends credibility and reinforces and then reproduces the very thing that two seconds ago we were saying needed to be abolished?*

That is the interplay that we need to have. Because then those of us that are there, when we see that happen, we have to interrupt that. We're obligated to do that. At the risk of being criticized for being hierarchical or overbearing. At a certain point, I think it's necessary just to cause a little bit of productive disruption when things are falling back into a certain kind of reformist paradigm. So it's a tension that we navigate all the time.

Reparations, 'Looting', and Philanthropy

CEC

How might we think differently about reparations?

Byrd

I think when we talk about dollars, and reparations: *where can that come from?* I want the police budget. I want their money. Give me that \$10 million increase please. I think that's beautiful. Why not take the money that you use to harass these communities, that you use to enslave these communities, to fund them. And so they can do whatever they want with it.

Abolition means reparations for me too. And I think it really comes down to the ability to liberate ourselves the land simultaneously. It's not just about getting

the police off campus. We want police off campus, so that we can get rid of the fact that they're feeding the jails. And then get rid of the prisons. All of it. The whole nine yards

Hawthorne

I had a conversation with one of my students recently about how we think about how an abolitionist framework forces us to think about reparations differently. I think that's another example: *how do we envision reparations not as a downward redistribution of resources from the state, but actually as our obligations to one another?*

CEC

How might we think differently about 'looting' and philanthropy?

Rodriguez

My objection to the term looting is towards its mainstream usage. And if people insist on saying – to the extent that it has that kind of cachet and gravity to it – I'll use looting against you. Again, this is another tool, like a martial arts kind of kind of maneuver, a gorilla kind of maneuver. So if you're gonna say looting and let's really talk about why it's so different than notions of crime and murder and killing.

Looting is a fucking cop, plantation owner, cracker phrase. We don't say that word. If we do, we do it with a sense of irony. Looting means violation of the sanctity and religion of property. There is a kind of rudimentary ethics behind that. Looting is not a term that I would use in public in any way other than then ironically or sarcastically. Looting – in the way that it's mainstream meaning – is something that I would apply toward things like what the university does to contingent faculty. That's looting. *Right?* I would say that's what wealthy people do to social capital and the tax base. They loot the rest of us by paying \$750 in tax, or nothing, when they're supposedly billionaires.

I just had this conversation with a group of foundations yesterday. They had this big conference, and they asked: "*What can foundations do?*" I said, well what you can do is invest resources in proliferating the right kind of leadership, meaning abolitionists leadership, people who have credibility in different communities as freedom fighters and as abolitionists. Like you can support them with your infrastructure, with the resources, and then get the fuck out the way. No strings attached. Get out of the way. That's what you can do. You are not in leadership.

That's a hard thing for a lot of these folks to hear. Because the whole premise of philanthropy – if you even look at the etymology of the term – is that the folks who are rendering the philanthropy are interested in actually shaping the

outcome. So that's kind of a paradigmatic shift – I don't know if it's a rupture altogether – because they can always take it back. But it's a shift.

Billionaires looting is what happens when people privatized, exploit, expropriate, and destroy the natural environment. That's looting. Looting is what happens when medical doctors in conjunction with the state go and forcibly sterilized people. That's looting.

What Is (Next) to be Done?

CEC

What does on-the-ground abolitionist organizing look like going forward?

Byrd

I think we have to get rid of individualism and come together. It'll be hard. Nobody says it's going to be easy. But I think the time is now. “We've always been,” as June Jordan says, “the ones we've been waiting for.”⁸ You know: “We have nothing else to lose, other than our chains.”⁹

Bringing demands and doing direct action, complemented with care – is how I see it escalating. I've been saying that I'm ready to go to the governor as soon as somebody else is. I've been saying it since day one. I really just believe that we can go for it. We can build up our momentum in any way we want to. Considering the way that things are online now, I think that people have a lot of time in their house to sit and think, and see what our message is, and writing, writing, writing through.

Hawthorne

When it comes to questions of practical on-the-ground organizing: I often struggle between, on the one hand, a radical investment in disruption, and then, that stubborn liberal voice in my head that's like, “let's sit down and talk to people we disagree with, bring the facts and engage in storytelling.” And I often wonder – *Do I need to kill the liberal in my head?* – to use Althusserian language. Or is there still something to be said for that really difficult work of translation.

We had created a sort of space where, amongst ourselves, abolition was sort of taken for granted as the analytical framework. And we were learning more about

⁸ June Jordan, “Poem for South African Women,” 1978, <http://www.junejordan.net/poem-for-south-african-women.html>, Last accessed on May 18, 2021.

⁹ See Marx and Engels (2005).

it and then figuring out how to actually do that work in practice. And by the end of the six weeks, we thought: “Okay, well now we're all talking to each other. And we all speak the same language. *What do we do with this information that we have?*” And that's where the idea for the Abolition Fair came about.¹⁰ *How do we translate abolition?* How do we make this accessible to a wider community that has been sort of fed a set of narratives about what police reform can and should look like?

I was asked in an interview with a colleague in Italy about whether protest works, or whether disruptive protest is alienating. *You know what I realized?* When it comes to mobilizations, especially Black mobilizations against police violence, there's actually no way that we can protest will not alienate racists and white supremacists. Sitting, kneeling, peacefully marching, holding signs – all of these things are going to be painted as disruptive regardless.

So, planning protest from the starting point of trying to preserve white fragility, or appealing to the preexisting biases of folks who are invested in these institutions of white supremacy, your movement is dead before it even gets off the ground. And I think that if we look historically at colonial struggle, we could start with Fanon. But there's so many other places that we can look to, for example: anti-apartheid mobilizations in South Africa. Disruption is necessary because it denaturalizes situations that have been taken for granted for so long.

We held an Abolition Fair: had a combination of online and offline events. So we had a virtual discussion about the practice of revolutionary study and political education. We've been talking a lot about the relationship between abolition and mutual aid. We had some groups from Santa Cruz, some members from Santa Cruz Community Fridges, do a whole workshop and create a set of resources about how to set up a community fridge in your neighborhood.¹¹

Last night there was a BIPOC liberation bike ride, where folks biked through town to raise awareness about abolition. There's going to be a presentation about cahoots because there's actually a lot of interest in trying to institute some kind of cahoots-type alternative Emergency Response Program. We had a folk herbalist who did a workshop about abolition and the nervous system. So again, thinking about alternatives to calling the police. And strategies of self-care can also mediate individual stress responses that result in escalation of conflict.

CEC

What role does reform play in regards to the police?

¹⁰ See Abolition Fair Recap here <https://abolitious.org/> Last Accessed on 5/29/21.

¹¹ See <https://www.instagram.com/sccommunityfridge/?hl=en> Last accessed on 5/26/21.

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We're in that moment right now where people are recognizing that reform is both ultimately insufficient and in the immediate sense may be a central part of the problem. So let's now distinguish between reform and reformism because that's a central part of what I think we have to analyze.

Reform is a logic that presumes the existence of the very same institutional system or structure that you are trying to adjust. Reform can be militant. You can have people who die, who risk life, limb, community and being over reform. Militancy has nothing to do with it. It has to do with the logic of what it is you're struggling for. So what reform is trying to do is to institute some form of change to an existing system. But it presumes the existence of the system. That's reform. Reformism is the thing we got to fight.

Reformism is a dogma. At best, it's ideological. But it's closer to dogma. It's the notion that those very same institutions and systems *must* continue to exist. It's to address those institutions and systems: policing, racial capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc., we could go on all the way on down the list. Reformism says that those things *will* and really *must* continue to exist because my world will fall apart if they don't. So to the extent that those oppressive systems, those asymmetrically violent systems, continue to exist, then the very limitation of my worldview for change is reform. And that is it. Anything beyond that needs to be smashed. That's the kind of dirty tacit aspect of reformism: it is actually a militarization against abolition, it is a militarization against anti-colonialism, against revolutionary struggle, even against radical struggle. It actually criminalizes those forms, by saying, those are outside the horizon of what is pragmatically possible and justifiable.

Reformism is the thing we need to fight. Now, we can do that at the same time that we are developing a serious perpetual and rigorous abolitionist analysis of specific reform struggles. If I take my own analysis seriously, which is to say that the United States is a condition of asymmetrical domestic war. That's what the police do. It is what they represent. It's what policing is as a broader cultural structure and social form. It extends beyond the police. That is a state of domestic war. If I take my own analysis seriously, then what reform can be, if I support it, is a method of casualty management.

You can actually have genocidal and asymmetrical war making structures in place that are extracting, massive targeted, geographically concentrated, casualties by particular people in high places – Incarcerated people, homeless, homeless Black folks, trans people, etc. – concentrated targets of evisceration and violation. What a reform might help you do is to minimize those casualties. Now the challenge we have, as abolitionists, if we're going to bring an analysis that is serious to the table, is we need to address whether a particular form, to the extent it does the work of casualty management, might by design, or even unintentionally, contribute to an expansion of those very same structures of state violence. The existence of the police as we know it now is the direct product of reform.

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About the authors

The California Economists Collective (CEC) launched as an interdisciplinary network of scholars and advocates working across the University of California, with partners at Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, and Santa Cruz campuses. CEC aims to advance struggles for justice via institutional changes to the economy with scholar-activist research, public education, and film projects.

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