



Commentaries in Urban Education

We Used to Think, But Now We Know: Abolitionist Pedagogy

Abstract

This article reprints a lightly edited paper by Zoe Hammer, which she presented as part of a panel of scholar-activists and long-time prison abolitionists at the American Studies Association in November 2014. In a brief introduction to the paper, Hammer reflects on how, in 2014, the framing of torture in prison by both prison officials and prison reformers obscured the systemic violence of prison under the guise of what James Kilgore calls “carceral humanism,” thus emphasizing the importance of the analysis and framing as abolitionists. The article contextualizes this 2014 moment of reformist versus abolitionist frameworks, particularly through the author’s lens of many years of teaching college courses about the prison industrial complex and abolition.

Keywords

[abolition](#), [carceral humanism](#), [torture](#), [pedagogy](#), [prison tourism](#)

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Figure 1. "Unfence the Future" by Roger Peet

Background

I presented this paper as part of a panel called “Keywords in Critical Prison Studies” at the American Studies Association in November 2014 in Los Angeles. Presenters were scholar-activists with long-time commitments to prison abolition and experience building abolitionist organizations and working on campaigns in and outside of prisons. Each panelist was asked to reflect on what we have learned—through action, organization, and reflection—about abolition since the seminal 1998 Critical Resistance conference. The panel was convened by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a preeminent geographer and abolitionist, who also co-convened the Critical Resistance conference at the University of California, Berkeley with Angela Y. Davis. Panelists had eight minutes to speak and were asked to compose our comments around a keyword using the prompt “We used to think X, but now we know Y.” My comments focused on the keyword “torture” because when the paper was composed in 2014, uprisings against some of the most violent abuses of the carceral state were happening all over the United States. I wanted to reflect on the emphasis that abolitionist activists and scholars were placing on gruesome bodily harm, and pose organizing questions about the way this approach to representation might be co-opted by the forces of state violence.

Abolitionist scholar-activists of all kinds are engaged in pedagogical practice in and outside of prisons, from classrooms and organizing spaces to political education and training. If there is an abolitionist pedagogy, it owes its origins and purposes to teaching practices forged through struggle, such as Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, the long tradition of intellectual practice within prisons, feminist engagements with political education, and critical ethnic studies. It has emerged from Third World movements and the Third World Strike infiltrating the academy and emphasizing praxis—the interweaving of theory, organization, and reflection.

Gramsci famously argues that the state itself is an educative force with a privileged capacity to shape the consciousness of its subjects, functioning in ways that can limit the range of what we can imagine is possible. Abolitionist pedagogy must facilitate our shared abilities to theorize the state as a political battlefield (in all of its complexity and contradictions); as it is narrated and counter-narrated; as it shapes consciousness, landscapes, and life chances; and as an uneven set of capacities created through struggle. Abolitionists encourage us to think creatively, strategically, and collectively about how some of our non-coercive capacities might be changed and directed to serve different purposes

(Gilmore & Gilmore, 2007). This conceptualization of the state is my understanding of Gilmore's theorization of states and how they can most usefully be engaged by abolitionist organizers.

At the time of this writing in 2014, activists were in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, and across the United States, rising up against police murders of Black people, communities on the US-Mexico border were pushing back against the militarism of checkpoints, military command centers, and surveillance towers in their communities, and migrants were launching hunger strikes in detention centers. The "common sense" that the deadly forces of the state were needed to provide protection was becoming untenable. State legitimacy was in crisis. In response, reform proposals emerged, as did narratives that cherry-picked terms and concepts from the movement to abolish the prison industrial complex. They were used as a strategy to restore the state's legitimacy and expand its deadly forces. Abolitionists are especially wary of reforming the prison industrial complex because, historically, reform has most often divided movements and expanded the scope and reach of the state's deadly forces. Such forces fail to keep us any safer; if they did, the United States would be the safest place on earth. Abolitionists are not opposed to all reforms as improving access to housing, healthcare, education, and jobs, for example, would go a long way to making communities safer as we continue to organize for a more life-sustaining future.

As an abolitionist, part of my task was to support my fellow learners in navigating this contradictory terrain by closely examining the deadly forces of the state, thinking critically about how we are being encouraged to think and feel, posing questions, participating in organized action to make change, and reflecting together on what we continue to learn. The following paper offers a case study of this abolitionist pedagogy in dialogue with a group of abolitionist educators.

Keyword: Torture

November 2014

Torture: The action or practice of inflicting **severe pain** on someone as a **punishment** or to **force** them to do or **say** something, or for the **pleasure** of the person **inflicting** the **pain**.

Judicial Torture: Torture that is sanctioned by the state and executed by duly accredited officials; “the English renounced judicial torture in 1640” (Oxford University Press, 2014).

We used to think judicial torture was an evil from the once-dark European past . . .

From the progressivist assumptions of liberal political theory to Foucault’s (1977) challenges to those assumptions in *Discipline and Punish*, we were sold the story that judicial torture was the practice that the contemporary justice system was invented to replace.

But now we know the tale that judicial torture was renounced is both inaccurate and a useful cover story.

If you visit the Maricopa County Jail in Phoenix, Arizona as a *tourist*, your tour guide will begin with the display of hand-made knives and proceed to describe tortures imposed, according to your guide, by incarcerated people on one another. The tour guide’s story is offered as a celebration of revenge, as material evidence that incarcerated people are violent monsters who are getting the punishment they deserve. In state prisons, run by appointed wardens rather than elected sheriffs, similar presentations are more like classroom lectures in which hand-made weapons are calmly displayed and passed around as artifacts from the barely controllable culture of torture that prisons exist to contain. Or so we are encouraged to believe.

These accounts convey the message that prisons are torture chambers, that within them, torture is the order of everyday life, and, importantly, that incarcerated people are themselves the torturers. In each lecture, the weapons are held up like totems in the hands of gung-ho colonial soldiers or rational colonial ethnographers, with both insisting that, while torture is ubiquitous in prison, it is not authorized by the state. We learn, instead, that prisons are *judicial torture-free* torture chambers, run by state agents struggling to impose order on

an uncivilized mob of tortured torturers. It is a bewildering story and it is hard to resist flashes of remembered and imagined pain, and a strong desire for a suit of armor when you hear it. In both scenarios, we (the presumed tourists, since people with records are generally not permitted on such excursions) are positioned as individual subjects of a civilizing state that stands between our vulnerable bodies and an undifferentiated, violent, racialized mob.

These prison tour guides expect their audiences to connect to this story emotionally in a very specific way. It is their job to make us *know*, and more importantly to *feel*, that prisons are the things that stand between, rather than produce, those on the inside and those on the outside. The *work* of prison tour guides is the work of framing. They are producing and redeploying a historically and politically situated, emotionally energetic torture frame, and it is productive, political labor on behalf of the carceral state.

As political work, framing does a number of things. It encourages some and discourages others' understanding and feeling about who we are and where we are. As a political tool, frames provide maps for group identification through the representation of shared problems and solutions. Successful political frames inspire active participation in projects to realize the futures they project. The prison tour guide's use of the torture frame is a bid to refresh the presumed group identifications and political commitments required of the unincarcerated to ensure a securely carceral future. And we know (because volumes of research and the success of Fox News tell us) that the most successful frames are the ones that provoke the most emotionally energetic identifications.

We used to think reframing the story of judicial torture was an important part of challenging the prison expansion agenda, and we were right . . . *But now we know* the torture frame has limits.

The formal and informal research, organizing experiences, critical analysis, and imaginative labor of abolitionists and other intellectuals working inside and outside of prison walls provide material for crafting frames that are developed, tested, and reworked through campaigns, actions, and projects. Two key abolitionist meta-frames produced through this work are:

1. Prisons cause the problems they claim to solve.

2. Prisons don't keep us safe, living in a world where people's needs are fulfilled keeps us safe.

These guiding frames challenge dominant thought by enabling the feeling that prisons are not inevitable and that interpersonal justice becomes possible in a world of social justice. They make prisons visible as the root causes of problems and propose the idea that a future without prisons is a place in which everyone's needs can be met. Within these abolitionist meta-frames, torture is seen as a problem that prisons produce rather than solve, instead of a problem that can be solved by hiring nicer cops and guards. Yet, in mobilizing identification with the individual tortured body, abolitionists run the risk of energizing urgent desires for individualized judicial violence as the most immediate and only imaginable option for safety in the present.

Campaigns to reduce prison populations and shut down targeted community-to-prison pipelines have mobilized these frames, recasting state actors as abusive coercers. Campaigns to abolish acts such as long-term solitary confinement and racial profiling have emphasized the severe pain inflicted by these practices and, in doing so, have drawn new people into the movement motivated by compassion and outraged by the legitimacy of judicial torture.

To be clear, I am not making the silly claim that abolitionist reframings alone have produced this outrage. The wanton intrusion of increasingly abusive and unaccountable forms of law enforcement into more and more aspects of more and more people's daily lives is generating outrage and inspiring protests all over the United States, from Pelican Bay in California and the Federal Detention Center in Eloy, Arizona to Ferguson, Missouri.

A different jail tour suggests that the political uses of the torture frame may be co-optable. In 2011, I accompanied my students on a tour of the San Francisco County jail, known locally as the "glamour slammer." In a dramatic reframing of the knife-brandishing performances of the previous week, we were escorted through the marble lobby to a large, empty, brand-new dormitory and treated to a host of speakers who described the jail as a one-stop shop for education, services, and spiritual renewal. "These people aren't monsters," we were lectured, "they are coming from tragically violent communities, and they need some support." In this account, let's call it the "rescue frame," we tourists are still invited to peer in at an imaginary landscape peopled by a violent, culturally inferior mob and a group of public servants keeping people safe from them, but

in this scenario, the relationship between the prison and the mob is reversed, with the prison walls paternalistically protecting the imprisoned from the communities that, it is assumed we will understand, spawned and damaged them. Later in the tour, we were informed that “California is the best place in the world to be incarcerated if you’re gay or transexual!”

While this was not my first encounter with what James Kilgore (2014) has dubbed “carceral humanism,” which includes many instances of glamour slammer-style prison rebranding, from green prisons to women’s villages, it was the first I had encountered that was so explicit about connecting their rebranding project to expansion, with our hosts openly drooling over anticipated funds from California’s realignment plan [in which thousands of people were transferred from state facilities to county jails to comply with a Federal court order to reduce the state prison population]. Kilgore (2014) links this repackaging of mass incarceration to “rumblings of change in the criminal justice system,” offering it as evidence that various planners of incarceration are attempting to avoid systemic restructuring while conservatives are planning and positioning themselves to “drive anticipated reform” toward new frontiers of expansion. Kilgore is especially concerned about the potential for new projects billed as alternatives to incarceration to expand the prison system beyond anything previously imaginable. He paints a chilling scenario of life with ankle monitors, reporting that people who have been sentenced to wear them describe the experience as a form of “privatized” remote-controlled incarceration that transfers institutional costs to incarcerated families and that, at the urban scale, threatens to become a regime of mobility control that would produce geographic exclusion zones with great potential to become “new ways to reconstruct the space of our cities.” Given Kilgore’s alert to the potential for humanist technologies to expand the scale of the ongoing reorganization of cities as prisons, and given the explosive extension of interagency collaboration that stretches the PoliMigra [the collaboration between local police and immigration agents] dragnet across this continent, and given the militarized shoring up of the global color line, I am feeling motivated to think closely about frames.

We used to think this paper was about torture, but now we know it’s not.

Not because prisons aren’t torture chambers. They are. Not because torture is okay with us. It’s not. And not because the state’s monopoly on legitimate

coercion isn't a root cause of some of the most violent forms of group differentiation. It is. This paper is about our power to use representation as a strategic tool to challenge that legitimacy. It's about the risks and possibilities of what is made more and less visible when we mobilize the torture frame. The torture frame does several things I am planning to think more about: It creates a morally charged distinction between the infliction of severe pain onto individual bodies and other modalities and scales of social control. Does this identification of framing make it harder to challenge the legitimacy of less instantaneously painful and larger-scale modes of harm and social control?

The torture frame individualizes social disorder.

Does this energize demands for arrest? Is it a barrier to figuring out what meaningful community accountability might look like, especially an abolitionist accountability that does not depend on lethal contradictions between mobility and immobility?

The torture frame encourages an emotionally energetic mode of undifferentiated identification.

Is this compatible with the project of challenging the legitimacy of deadly racial differentiation in a colorblind racial state? Or does it energize the will to think and feel more collectively? Or both?

The torture frame energizes anxiety about individual biophysical security.

Does this diminish our capacity and will to imagine social security? Does it make it harder to imagine responding collectively and generously to dramatic change, let alone plan it?

Given plans to legitimize further expansion through carceral humanism, and given the increasing visibility of surging protests against police brutality, prison conditions, and deportation, and given stunning plans in place to radically expand the landscape of coercive control over human mobility, it is clear that the torture frame is up for grabs in a moment when the stakes of the struggle for legitimacy

are climbing.

In 2024, as state violence continues to morph and expand all over the world, along with rising resistance and opposition, the torture frame is still up for grabs. Applying political framing to investigate the contradictory uses of representations of violence is still useful for posing critical questions about contradictions. If we apply an abolitionist pedagogy, this tool is not about “showing both sides.” Rather, it is about always positioning learners as organizers, authors, artists, and actors; as people who can develop and apply strategies and practices to make and remake the world, within conditions made by others before we got here.

Since 2014, when the above paper was written, there has been an explosion of abolitionist organizing, mobilization, publishing, and consciousness. Over this past decade, Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s concept of “abolition as presence” has helped abolitionists think even more broadly and deeply about what a world without prisons might look like and, importantly, to consider ways in which people are already in the process of creating an abolitionist future right here in the present (Kushner, 2019). Abolitionist educators seeking to develop learners into conscious makers of their own future might develop assignments around iterations of Gilmore’s question: Where are people re-making places and practicing emancipatory social relationships now? What can we learn from them? How are people solving problems without prisons, police, or other carceral solutions (including carceral humanism)? How are people devising solutions to problems in ways that leave no living being behind?

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