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**No estamos todas, faltan las presas! Contemporary Feminist Practices Building Paths toward Prison Abolition**

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*Princeton*

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**Volume 22 Issue 2 (June 2020) Article 7****Susana Draper,****"No estamos todas, faltan las presas! Contemporary Feminist Practices Building Paths toward Prison Abolition"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss2/7>>

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on a small but crucial aspect of the question of gendered violence and the multiple injustices that feminist mobilizations have once again brought into mainstream discussion: how do we find ways out of women's imprisonment and stop the abusive violence that permeates institutional and domestic spheres without relying on those same forms of violence as a solution to the problems we face? This is a question that comes from a long history of knowledge-praxis created by groups of radical Black feminist women, and women of color, trans, and queer people, working together on the problematization of gendered violence at both interpersonal and institutional levels. The experiences that I analyze share an emphasis on language and imagination, viewed as a resource for a long path toward liberation. This is something that I find inspiring and important to explore: how might small exercises in language and imagination generate new possibilities for creating different social relations and forms of collective, sustainable existence after imprisonment? Visualizing collective struggles by women who are and who were formerly imprisoned in different parts of South and North America enables us to see forms in the here and now that can lead us to a different future.

**Susana DRAPER**

### **No estamos todas, faltan las presas! Contemporary Feminist Practices Building Paths toward Prison Abolition**

*An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives" (Critical Resistance, "What is the PIC? What is abolition?").*

The women's mobilizations that have been taking place internationally over the past three years have generated renewed ways of socializing knowledge about social reproduction and indicated the need to build multiple and interconnected languages of resistance against precarious conditions of life under neoliberalism. As Liz Mason-Deese has argued, part of the novelty of the recent women's strikes movement lies in "the capacity of addressing women's labor in relation to the economic and political function of gendered violence" (464). This has involved looking at gendered violence as an active component of social relations occurring in different spaces: workplaces, homes, schools, prisons, detention centers, borders, streets, etc. Introducing the strike as a strategy and process has also been a creative form of critiquing the adaptation and capture of a feminist language that became functional to the system. In this sense, the women's strike movement is bringing back the revolutionary force of a feminist vision that is not willing to "adapt to" and be "included in" a more "livable" patriarchal and capitalist order, but rather expresses a desire for social justice and transformation. For the movement to be successful, there must be a transformation of the different power relations that (re)produce violent heteropatriarchal hierarchies and the enactment of forms of knowledge and memory sharing that envisage another possible world.

One of the many issues about social reproduction and violence that we need to address relates to the challenge of *reconfiguring a language and poetics of justice* that is not limited to the confinements of liberal individualism, which would bring questions posed for decades in relation to prison abolition and social justice into the mainstream. The proliferation of different popular feminist strategies, which can be recognized forms of expressing the constitutive role of gender violence in all spheres of everyday life, has enabled a more public discussion on the inseparability of forms of interpersonal abuse and an abusive institutional and economic system. In this sense, the movement has been amplifying old questions about what it means to live in an abusive society, including the question of prison abolition, which is intimately connected to the need to think about forms of dealing with harm, violence, and social injustice that do not themselves rely on harm, violence, and a deepening of social injustice.

A specific feature of the current feminist mobilizations has been their explicit attempts to draw attention to imprisonment. Starting in Buenos Aires, through the work of the collective *YoNoFui*, and subsequently spreading to many other places, banners saying "¡No estamos todas, faltan las presas!" (Not all of us are here, the women in prison are missing!) became an integral part of the street mobilizations against femicides and gendered violence. Through this slogan, the social reality of many women, mostly poor, racialized, and gender nonconforming, gained not only visibility but a connection to the problem of violence. While those who are behind bars are usually left out of the picture in political mobilizations, here they took the center stage. Similarly, the 2017 and 2018 NYC women's strike marches made a mandatory stop outside of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office on Varick Street, to demand an ICE-free city and life. These details, which come from the poetics of the mobilization, from the materiality of words and places, are very important as they speak to an understanding of the political that connects interpersonal and institutional gendered violence. What is at stake is a radical transformation of what we understand by a livable life, starting from the situation of those who are most vulnerable.

In this article, I focus on a small but crucial aspect of the question of gendered violence and the multiple injustices that feminist mobilizations have once again brought into mainstream discussion: how do we find ways out of women's imprisonment and stop the abusive violence that permeates institutional and domestic spheres without relying on those same forms of violence as a solution to the problems we face? This is a question that comes from a long history of knowledge-praxis created by groups of radical black feminist women, and women of color, trans, and queer people, working together on the problematization of gendered violence at both interpersonal and institutional levels within the context of an abolitionist vision. Two primary questions emerge from this knowledge-praxis: What forms of thinking and doing does abolition involve? And how do they relate to contemporary

revolutionary feminist practices that explicitly address social reproduction? In this article, I consider concrete experiments in which collectives of women have worked on building ways out of the prison system, in both the North and the South. I will mostly center my analysis on a series of snapshots of the work of two groups, *YoNoFui* from Buenos Aires and *A New Way of Life* from Los Angeles, pointing out how their work has made the relationship between gendered violence, women's incarceration, and a deep crisis in social reproduction explicit. Although both groups are well-known today, they began in the midst of silence and invisibility. They were essential to breaking the silence constructively, opening spaces for imagining alternative networks of care and support, and showing the need for cooperative forms of doing—without which there is no way out of the prison system. I will also mention related work by collectives of women from other locations, instances from which we can see the global dimension of this situation—what Julia Sudbury has called "*global lockdown*" – as well as forms of resistance through which women, queer, and trans people are organizing and taking action in order to envision a different future.

The experiences that I have chosen to analyze here share an emphasis on language and imagination, viewed as a departure point for the long path toward liberation. This is something that I find inspiring and important to explore: how from small exercises in language and imagination, whole new possibilities of creating different social relations and forms of collective, sustainable existence after imprisonment can emerge. Visualizing collective struggles by women who are and who were formerly imprisoned in different parts of South and North America enables us to see forms in the here and now that can lead us to a different future. This is something that Angela Davis connects to a practice of dialectical thought that allows us to see in the present the components that pose, sometimes in a distorted form, the lines of flight for other forms of forging social life. Looking at collective forms of resistance from within cycles of imprisonment, we find a practice of *commoning* in the sense that Silvia Federici gives to the word *as a verb*; that is, as a process and collective praxis tied to the creation of different social relations that reproduce collective life in ways that do not replicate the abusive and exploitative power relations that constitute capitalist life. As she and George Caffentzis allow us to see in "Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism," commoning processes should be addressed as "experiments in self-provisioning and the seeds of an alternative mode of production in the make" (95).

### **Gendered violence, prison abolition, and political language – towards non-analogical forms of thinking**

As Vikki Law observes in "How can we reconcile prison abolition with #metoo?", the past two decades "have seen an increase in prison abolition groups and organizing" as a protest against different forms of criminalization that end up reinforcing systems of violence and social injustice. Thanks to the persistent work of different collectives and their knowledge production spanning more than a decade, discussions about transformative justice, community accountability, and prison abolition, which had been previously marginalized from the dominant landscape, are now part of the language of how to envision deep social change. Without offering ready-made "formulas" for a solution, these discussions are essential for disentangling the multiple forms of oppression at stake, and allow us to see some crucial problems that relate to different forms of punishment and criminalization to which women are subjected when we resist the role of passive victims. They are discussions that are asking us to (1) engage and re-articulate short and long-term memories of resistance to violence in relation to different interconnected forms of expropriation, ownership and abuse, and (2) to look at a longer sequence in which forms of imperialism and military practices have continued their political and economic regimes through renewed forms of mass incarceration.

In Latin America, discussions about social injustice also connect with a series of responses to the brutal violence exercised by the U.S. sponsored military regimes that intervened throughout the continent within the context of Cold War strategies and which, were crucial for the installation of the neoliberal political economies implanted by the so-called "Washington consensus" to "free" the market through multiple practices and policies of social enslavement. After the processes of so-called "transitions" that put an official end to the dictatorships, a whole system of military/police violence, killings, torture, and incarceration have continued with the so-called "War on Drugs." Antitrafficking reforms have had the most damaging effect on the lower and racialized classes, and poor black, brown, and indigenous women have been the most impacted, to the point that if one looks at the war on drugs from the perspective of the massive imprisonment of lower class racialized and indigenous women, we can say that it has been a frontal war on poor women.

Many of the creative strategies that were developed to confront the impunity of military violence are now being used to respond to situations of abuse and femicide at different levels. The slogans that were used to demand "*aparición con vida*" of those who disappeared under military dictatorship, have resurfaced as in a key-phrase, "*Vivas nos queremos*," in the struggle against femicide. Another revived strategy is the practice of *escraches*, a process of popular justice used to demand accountability for those who tortured and killed during the military regimes, and who afterward continued their lives without ever being brought to justice. Recently these *escraches* have been re-functionalized to point to the impunity of abuse at universities and workplaces, the use of photographs in demonstration or femicide alerts, etc.

In the US, the connection between the present and the 1970s and 1980s also relates to forms of dealing with impunity and abuse connected to police brutality and judicial practices. Such impunity has led to the search for different forms of justice and accountability within communities of poor, black, brown and indigenous people. This was the kernel of Black and US Third World feminisms in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was at this time that another form of memory was also developing through a connection between feminism and abolitionism. In her classic *Women, Race & Class*, Angela Davis traces a history of women organizing within the abolition movement-- before white, middle-class women engaged with the struggles for "women's rights" and cast abolition aside as secondary to women's suffrage.

Looking at the experiences of women in prison in different parts of the world helps us grasp the connection between imprisonment and neoliberal policies. Welfare cuts, homelessness, housing crises (evictions and gentrification), precarization of labor, land expropriation, unemployment, lack of child care, denial and lack of support to heal from multiple forms of abuse (including police abuse), forced migration, criminalization of miscarriage, pregnancy, and abortion, criminalization of self-defense against abusive partners, the war on drugs, and so on: all these effects of neoliberal policies lead to cycles of incarceration from which there is no clear way out.

In the present, the historical connection between feminism and prison abolition relates to the history of critique and organizing that has addressed the problem of gender violence in relation to systemic violence. In "Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the Twenty-First Century," Davis poses a *feminist methodology* as a form of thinking and doing that mobilizes the element of surprise, the unexpected—that which is not part of the norms within which we think. As Davis argues, we need to look at a category from a marginal perspective that can "basically bust up the category" and in this process, "illuminate so much more than simply looking at the normative dimensions of the category" (103).

This process involves developing forms of thought that enable us to see violence at work in different places without assuming homogeneous existences and social positioning. In *Structural Violence*, Joshua Price shows us how dominant forms of talking about and dealing with violence against women use *analogical thought* that invisibilizes institutional violence:

Depending on their social location, people see different forms of abuse. *This question of space and location is crucial*. When one focuses on the spaces women are in, then one can see that women who work as prostitutes and women who are harassed and detained at the border face violence, though they are often not included in initiatives to stop gendered violence. Institutions such as the border patrol and the police are sometimes indirect perpetrators, when they collude with batterers by doing nothing or sending women back to unsafe situations, including deporting them. Sometimes, however, agents of the state are direct perpetrators of violence against women: because of their position, they can physically or sexually assault women with relative impunity. *Women at the margins experience violence generated by structures, institutions, and histories, which make their experiences irreducible to the commonsense notion that violence against women is basically a question of "domestic violence"* (2; emphasis added).

Working from a *non-analogical perspective* allows us to tackle the tension that has separated the work of feminists dealing with violence from the struggles for racial justice. The issue at stake is, following Dean Spade, that the "universal" language of the law (even when it is targeted by minorities for reform) rarely helps to stop situations of gendered violence suffered by those who are neither seen nor qualify as ideal subjects in societies that are permeated by racist, sexist, heteropatriarchal structures. Another related problem--signaled for years by Black and racialized women who were not heard--among the many we might turn to, is—is that those in charge of 'enforcing' the law are themselves abusers.

In her *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*, Beth E. Richie departs from this historical tension between struggles to end violence against women (mostly limited to an understanding of "domestic violence") and struggles for social justice. She emphasizes the need

to construct a common language that would allow us to see expressions of institutional, legal, and police violence that black and women of color face on a daily basis.

This is also the question that made the historic INCITE! conference and further statement co-written with Critical Resistance possible. The conference and statement ask when and how the struggle to end violence against women started to rely on the very system that had been so abusive for many women. How did a struggle against violence adapt and align itself with agents of violence? How can someone who has been systemically abused by police forces see the police as an ally? From this perspective, analyzing violence and abuse requires us to develop an analysis of an abusive institutional system, where gender violence is part of a broader violent organization of life. Addressing the connections between feminism and abolition requires critiquing the co-optation of many feminist practices by the system, and doing so from a perspective that seeks to build other forms of power within new social relations.

One of the most memorable images used in the INCITE! conference in the year 2000 comes from Angela Davis's *Autobiography*. It is the story of finding a woman on the street; she has been raped and left on the side of the road, only to be found by a group of policemen on patrol who then also raped her and left her on the street. For women who are imprisoned, abuse has usually been part of their lives, and abuse is constant within the prison system—prison is itself one of the forms that has naturalized practices of the systemic abuse of women. In "Towards the Horizon of Abolition," an insightful interview with John Duda, Mariame Kaba says:

I always say this, part of why I'm an abolitionist is because I'm a feminist. Prisons are not feminist. I cannot be somebody who is an anti-rape advocate and pro-prison. It's simply impossible. To me it's just, again as Dean Spade has said, the prison is a rapist itself. Often what we're doing when we sentence people to prison is sentencing them to judicial rape because we know that when they get into prison there is a high, high likelihood they will be assaulted and raped no matter what it is that they did before they went in there.

Connecting the experiences, knowledge, and practices of prison abolitionism and forms of transformative justice allows us to envision new possibilities in the face of questions that might otherwise feel paralyzing. It is from this perspective that some grassroots and community organizers have been developing new practices for addressing violence and practicing accountability through transformative justice without relying on a harmful policing system that cages people without looking at the question of how to transform the conditions that produce this harm. This lens allows us to consider violence and abuse within everyday forms of social relations, instead of seeing violence as it is portrayed by the society of the spectacle—as sporadic, random acts of sick individuals acting out of context. Looking at collectives like The Audre Lorde Project's *Safe OUTside the System*, what becomes clear is that we need to insist on envisioning forms of dealing with harm and violence that *do not just* replicate or *rely on* trusting the system that is criminalizing women, LGBTQIA people, people of color, poor, and indigenous peoples, more and more intensely.

Andrea Smith suggests that the prison industrial complex is one of the spaces that makes the contemporary logic of slavery at stake in the combination of racism and capitalist expropriation explicitly visible (4). From this perspective, a logic of "carceral capitalism" works in connection with what Joy James calls neoliberal penal states, which profit from enslaving large numbers of people. Narratives of "re-adaptation" make prison the ideal site for *endless* production and profiting. As Aída Hernández Castillo analyzes in the case of Mexico, different penal reforms proposed as part of political campaigns for more "security" within the context of the "war on drugs" perpetuate a system of "penal manufacture" where prisoners become slaves within a sweatshop logic, and this is "justified" as part of a better "rehabilitation" process (work discipline). She analyzes how the section for the Social Readjustment and Prevention Secretariat on the website of the state of Mexico *invites businessmen to invest in the penal industry*, enumerating the advantages this would have for them:

*they won't have to pay rent for services and facilities; they are exempt of taxes and social security fees; the labor is cheap, flexible, and abundant; punctuality is guaranteed; there is no need to pay benefits, yearly premiums, or vacation bonuses; there is no absenteeism and work hours are flexible; the payroll is handled by the Penal Industries Department (...)* Therefore, business entrepreneurs contribute to inmates' readjustment and benefit society. In other words, inmates are at the complete disposal of the entrepreneur at any time when there is a need for labor. Wages vary from one and a half to two dollars for twelve hour workdays (Castillo 200; emphasis added).

Within this narrative, the prisoner becomes an "ideal" (slave) worker for the corporation, as there are no limits to exploitation and disposability; the meaning of re-adaptation must be read here as a "re-

domestication" in the role of exploited without rights to protest, transgress, or flee from this place of absolute expropriation. As Julia Sudbury writes in the Introduction to *Global Lockdown*, we are living in a situation of global crisis in women's imprisonment. Spiraling incarceration rates, rampant overcrowding, and systemic human rights violations are common features of women's prisons from Lagos to Los Angeles. Beginning in 1973, an explosion in the number of women in prisons and jails in the United States has contributed to one of the largest prison building booms in world history. Whereas in 1970 there were 5,600 incarcerated women, by 2001, 161,200 women were held in U.S. prisons and jails, representing a staggering 2,800 percent increase (xiv).

The phenomenon is global and should be read as a continuation of forms of imperialism that strengthen and amplify many aspects of the military regimes established in the 1970s as part of the Cold War, and which are now being expanded as part of the logic of fear and security that effectuates the criminalization of poverty and profits from it. Sudbury continues,

From Mexico to South Africa, exploding prison populations have resulted in the construction of private, U.S.-style megaprisons. Statistics that look at gender but not race and class underrepresent the impact of the prison explosion on women of color and indigenous women. In all the countries just mentioned [United States, Britain, Australia, Mexico, and South Africa], oppressed racialized groups are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system. *The crisis of women's prisons can therefore be read as a crisis for working class women of color and indigenous women worldwide* (xiv; emphasis added).

This increasing criminalization of women fuels the Prison Industrial Complex, and increases corporations' and governments' earnings.

In the next section, I will discuss inspiring and exemplary experiments in which collectives of women have begun to build other social relations so as to put an end to the mutual entanglement of abuse, injustice, policing, and exploitation crystallized in the prison system.

### **YoNoFui – I wasn't – "The most unreal is the fence"**

YoNoFui started as a collective around 2007, but its origins date back to 2002, when María Medrano, poet and journalist, began a poetry workshop in Units 3 and 31 at the Ezeiza women's minimum security prison in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Marcia Paradiso, an artist who worked on a documentary about the workshop, *Lunas Cautivas* (Captive Moons), says that she was astonished by the role of poetry in the lives of these women. In a world that is more and more indifferent to poetry, words started having a different life and destiny there. My interest in highlighting this long-term experience is to show how the work these women performed over a decade, both in and out of the prison system, connects language, imagination and the reconfiguration of subjectivity, the development of an alternative economy, cooperative forms of labor, and sustained, collective care for each other. Through discussing this work of YoNoFui, I want to examine such exercises of freedom *that take imagination as their main source*, forms of embodied imagining that articulate and fuel concrete practices that, starting from language, develop a different form of collective life.

Some members of the collective recall that at its onset, the idea of a poetry workshop generated a certain derision: who reads poetry nowadays? Who would be interested in doing so under the harsh conditions of imprisonment? Soon after, the workshop became the space for a process of collective empowerment that continues into the present. As if following Audre Lorde's well-known idea that "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought," it was through poetry that a desire for liberation began to take form (Lorde, 37). And, in a Zapatista way, their words started *walking and building a road*--the poetry workshop led to a proliferation of similar workshops and projects inside the prison that made women feel they were not alone, by building spaces of affect, containment and survival. María Medrano says: "In the workshop, the word is the protagonist... words take an immense weight; it is the urgent necessity of *saying*... a saying that is not just a denunciation *but also a desire*. This was the base that started to nurture all the other spaces created by YNF" (Medrano).

Liliana Cabrera recalls: "When I arrived in 2006, I joined the poetry workshop ... After that, I also started going to the workshop on pinhole photography. It was a revolution in the prison because we were not allowed to take photos" (UNTREF). Liliana became a poet, and in order to publish poetry from the inside, she and other women created a modest publishing house, called "Cartonera del encierro," along the lines of the autonomist publishing cooperatives or "cartoneras" that proliferated in Argentina after the 2001 economic crash. The women in prison created handmade books with cardboard covers, and then sold the poetry books outside, in bookstores, or exchanged them for items equivalent to 10 Argentine pesos (such as calling cards, mail stamps, notebooks, pencils, pens, paper,

cigarettes). Liliana says about this process: "the first thing I *felt* was realizing that I *was able to do something* from the inside... I realized that one feels more imprisoned if one is also imprisoned *in one's head*" (UNTREF). Reflecting on the fact that all of this was created by women, María Medrano adds that gender played a crucial role in the process of collective empowerment, as giving value to oneself is harder for women prisoners:

We talk about women who live permanent sexual violence, psychological abuse... And what these other- more autonomous, collective--spaces inside, like the poetry or the photography workshops started doing *was saving zones of oneself*, to be able to say: *This, you cannot touch!* You cannot imprison the essence of someone... Sometimes, the contrary occurs, and this essence can get out and float stronger than before. This is part of a power of poetry. One that allowed women to empower themselves through words... (Medrano).

With time, the collective has managed to move beyond the prison walls. As some of the prisoners started to be released, the possibility of having a simultaneous series of workshops inside and outside was raised; however, *the main issue once outside was survival--not having money, not qualifying for jobs after prison, not having a place to live...* being rejected by family, community, the whole of society... Thus, without the option of a real "outside" women who were released ended up going back to prison. An idea began to develop: to create different workshops *inside and outside* that would provide women with the skills to qualify for a job or to sell what was produced in the workshops. The workshops on the outside are taught by released prisoners and volunteers, with different women participating: those on house-arrest, the recently-released, and those on transitory releases. The road out was built piecemeal, in a collective and self-determined way. Ramona Leiva remembers: "we were looking for the connection between the inside and the outside, and it started to take place through textile work, bookbinding, then printing, and after that, it was just a lot of other workshops: carpentry, journalism, drawing, textile design, shoe-making" (UNTREF).

Soon after, the process took an even more interesting direction: in December 2014, the participants applied to become a textile workers cooperative so as to create forms of survival and a different form of organizing labor collectively. As Ramona Leiva says: "the cooperative started with workshops, spaces for training, where we started to produce lots of products. This way, we are able to have jobs and offer jobs to the girls coming out, and also to show what we can do together" (UNTREF). María Medrano adds that it took a lot of work and a lot of dealing with the State and its laws. In the process of learning about how to build a cooperative, the participants faced a challenge that led to another struggle: repealing article 64 in the Law of Cooperatives, which states that people with a criminal record cannot be part of a board. At present, they have also started to organize a network of cooperatives of recently released prisoners, called *Red de Cooperativa de Liberadxs/Network of Cooperatives of the Recently Released*.

In the meantime, as the textile and design workshops were producing many objects, they also opened a small store, "La tiendita YoNoFui" where they could start selling the products made in the workshops in and out of prison. All of this work outside the prison takes place concurrently with the work inside, with women who are held at Ezeiza. María adds: "We work inside, not because we are interested in 'improving' the prison, as we know that the prison is impossible, that it does not work, and we all know that. But, we keep working inside because we are interested in being with, accompanying the women inside to be able to get out, to have a place outside where they could really have a life" (Medrano). Liliana remembers: "Sometimes, you are released but you don't have anyone there... I had only my father, but he was in another prison, Carlos Paz... My family now is *YoNoFui*" (UNTREF).

*YoNoFui* responded to a double challenge: how to get out of the prison in a society that rejects people with criminal records, having neither opportunities nor support after release. It also responded to the call of building a self-managed collective space, avoiding the usual organizations that try to help women by victimizing them, treating them as inferior. All of the group's projects are self-managed (*autogestivos*). Recently, the journalism workshop (*Colectivo tinta revuelta / Ink in Revolt Collective*) started a publication, *Yo SOY*. María says:

The work with the publication is really important for us, after many years, having been able to create our own means of communication, a space where we can think of the themes that we all experience, and to think about the prison from there ... When we started to think about a name for the publication, it was like a play around the name of our group, *YoNoFui*, a play around the idea and the intention behind the expression... when people use it tell you 'uf, estás en cana, ifuiste!' / 'Are you in jail? you are dead!' *And one was not. One is. I AM. Yo SOY!* That was the play around the name: an affirmation of ourselves, of our beings (UNTREF).

Karina Valobra adds that the publication is also important because, "It is a space where the voices of those inside can be heard" (UNTREF).

One of the texts published in the first issue of *YoSOY* poses the relationship between the work on language and the ability to imagine political, existential alternatives to imprisonment. Emphasis is placed on the role of an aesthetics that is not lived as a fetish, as a form of 'salvation', but as a collective form of doing, of tracing lines for a common flight from the precariousness of enclosed life, by which I mean to refer not only to literal imprisonment but also to enclosed individualism in neoliberal societies.

To live inside (Vivir institucionalizado) and without intimacy are two aspects that build the sensorial and subjective world inside prison (...) There is an idea in society, which is more accentuated inside, that artistic practices can make people better, or save them from something. I propose to question this idea. Art does not save, nor cure. (...) On the other hand, in the reconnection that art can help facilitate, the experience of freedom comes not just from its expressive capacity, but more essentially from its metaphoric capacity, the one that reaches its sense from the ruins of literal meaning. On the inside, in the empire of "foreclosing," artistic experience can be emancipating because it can prepare the construction of invention, of fictionalization (Rodríguez 42).

From the ruins of literal sense, key questions emerge with regard to the meaning of dignity and survival in ways that go beyond the language of economy and of the NGOs that offer 'services' through forms of victimization. This is done through articles that visualize imprisonment as part of a bigger social system, thus creating a consciousness about a bigger social picture. The last issue of *YoSoy* covers the problematic of transitioning to the outside. Liliana says:

not just what the outside is for us at the sensorial level when we are released, what to meet the streets again implies, but also the problem of getting a job, of finding a place to live, to find oneself again in a place from where one felt outside, but no ... that's not true. People think that one is not there.... but one is also there. To go back to that world after having been inside, like inside a Tupperware, is really hard... (UNTREF).

"Yo soy" (I am) implied a shift towards the process of empowerment experienced by most of the women involved in this project. The "YoNoFui" idea plays not only with what each prisoner proclaimed when first entering prison, but also with the idea of social death that imprisonment involves in our societies. The resulting "I am" publication circulates inside and outside of the prison, trying to work as a bridge, and deals with key issues women face both in prisons and in their life after release.

Their feminist road to abolition is paved by questions about the social reproduction of life, and an emphasis on care in and out of prison. Participants often question the stereotypes around women that are magnified through the situation of imprisonment and usually go unnoticed. In their experience at Ezeiza, participants question expectations about motherhood: the good mother, the bad mother, what is at stake when raising kids in prison, or when women on whom the family depends go to prison, or when women from other countries end up there, or when the demonization of women in prison results in the women there being forgotten. Women emphasize the long lines of visitors, usually women, taking food and children for visits with male prisoners, in contrast to the very short lines for those visiting women prisoners. The publication helps create a critical consciousness both inside and outside, posing key questions about the inside as well as about the outside – what going "out" means when there is neither support nor preparation, something that leads to a form of fear of going outside. Liliana emphasizes the paradox involved in the feeling of wanting to stay in prison, as the outside was even more difficult after years of disconnection.

In the years since the formation of YoNoFui, the work of the collective has gained increasing visibility, and their vision has influenced other collectives and education centers, as well as the renewed feminist struggles embodied by *NiUnaMenos* in Argentina, where they participated, always carrying words-reminders of those who are still inside on the streets: "No estamos todas, faltan las presas." With YoNoFui, we can see how words led to different roads that have made the situation of women's imprisonment visible while also creating different ways to see collective forms of going beyond, ways out. As the work of the collective grows, the challenge is to nurture the forms of horizontal and assembly-like organizing that have been crucial to the movement in and outside. This relates not only to the capacity of continuing to constitute themselves as a group, but also to the role played by cooperation and solidarity. Words written by Sandra Laura Guzmán emphasize the role that collective freedom plays in the struggle by contrasting it with the idea of an individual freedom in solitude:

*Freedom*

How sad, freedom in solitude  
Without honesty with society  
Without giving you an opportunity  
Without seeing reality  
Without giving a possibility

How sad,  
a freedom  
Without people to trust  
Without kindness

What might be of that freedom  
Full of falsity  
Without friendship  
Full of marginality  
Without finding affinities  
How sad,  
freedom  
In such darkness

Through the experience of YoNoFui, one can see a process that started with the very materiality of language through poetic expression. The process of breaking a long history of silence enabled a collective practice of care and feminist economy in which new social relations were developed. Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo describes a similar experience in the women's prison of Atlacholoaya, Morelos, through a workshop that also centered on the word. She writes that the possibility of breaking silence and starting to build a common language can be seen as a "tool of feminist reflection and as a strategy for the destabilization of colonial, racist, and sexist discourses" (Castillo 57).

The experience at the CERESO of Atlacholoaya is worth examining, at least briefly, as it also relates to women who started to work together with the "word as protagonist" and continued by creating a collective that works inside and outside the prison walls. The *Sisters in the Shadow Publishing Collective* (Colectivo Editorial Hermanas en la sombra) takes its name from the experience of many women in prison, most of them indigenous, who usually gathered in the only place that had nature, under the shade of a tree, the Guamúchil. The poet Esther de Olmos started coordinating a literary workshop in prison that led to an oral history workshop that focused on the stories of indigenous women. A collaboration between those who knew how to write and those who did not began. The book *Bajo la sombra del Guamúchil*, put out by the publishing collective, is woven by many voices and hands and gathers the experiences of indigenous women telling their stories. By bringing their personal histories of various forms of abuse together the book shows the commonality of their social situation, making it possible to identify systemic problems beyond mere isolated anecdotes. Similar figures recur under the rhythm of abuse and expropriation. This is made clear in the introduction: "The stories [*historias*] that we gather here, are not exceptional; they are just an example of the multiple histories of sexual, racist, discriminatory violence, and State violence, shared by many of the 16,632 women that are imprisoned in the 604 centers of reclusion that exist in Mexico" (25). This is important because, as in the experience of YNF, the word, the possibility of telling stories to one another triggers a process in which the "I" is no longer isolated, as bodies are in cells, allowing a social, systemic, and historical reading of a social situation. It allows us to de-privatize violence, not to conceive of it as something that happens because of what an individual did (the usual blaming of the one who goes through the experience of harm), but rather to frame it within a larger map of manifold violence. The word, here again, allowed for a process that wove subjective experience into the common rhythm of a shared history, and made it clear that the way "out" from that system that started in colonization and continued in the prison system could only be a collective form of walking out.

**A New Way of Life**

The experience of abuse that leads to a common struggle among many sisters is at the center of a recent publication by Susan Burton, *Becoming Ms. Burton*. The book narrates a process that goes from an individual pulse to the common rhythm of an embodied imagining, in which concrete practices develop from exercises of freedom that take imagination as their main source. In the narrative that recreates Burton's life, we can see a double history entangled in one. The process of constant abuse-expropriation-imprisonment that Susan Burton went through, showing again the abuse to prison pipeline, forms a first strand. A second strand reveals the process of creation of *A New Way of Life*, a different form of collective care and support that has helped build a path out of the prison system, springing from the most important questions many women face after completing a sentence: where to go? how to survive? who cares about it?

Burton began her autobiography in 1998 in Watts, Los Angeles. Its full title is: *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women*. Born and raised in East L.A., Burton narrates a life story in which many different forms of violence intersect: abuse, gang rape leading to pregnancy, police brutality, and imprisonment. After her child was killed (run over) by an off-duty LAPD officer who never apologized to her, Burton began a cycle of imprisonment that lasted three decades and only ended when her brother helped her pay for a recovery program in Santa Monica.

Presenting specific forms of imbricated oppressions and harm, all leading to different cycles of imprisonment, this *personal memory* serves as a collective testimony of a system that is not working for any of its supposed subjects, only for those who are increasingly profiting from its existence. We see in intimate detail how incarceration only leads to *more* incarceration. Thus the question becomes: why it is less feasible to talk about alternatives to incarceration than to see imprisonment as "an ordinary dimension of community life ... as if prison were an inevitable fact of life, like birth and death" (Davis 2003, 15). Burton writes from the experience of a life seemingly destined to imprisonment, and from having been trapped in a system that intensifies harm. At the very beginning of the text, she writes: "It is estimated that 85 percent of locked-up women were, at some or many points in their lives, psychologically or sexually abused, or both. Disproportionately, these women are black and poor. I was born and raised in those statistics. My life is now devoted to stopping this cycle" (28).

At the Santa Monica rehabilitation center, Burton saw how different forms of recovery from addiction and interactions with the judicial system were available for the wealthy. The chapter "A Tale of Two Systems" navigates this harsh class differentiation in the treatment of addiction, showing how the law is applied radically differently for those who are white and can afford a lawyer, and those who are relegated to incarceration.

Burton's life after recovery reminds us of Harriett Tubman, a connection that Michelle Alexander emphasizes in the preface to the book. Once freed and employed as a domestic worker in Pennsylvania, Harriett Tubman found no meaning in her individual "freedom" while others remained enslaved. In a similar manner, after recovery and working as a caregiver for elderly women, Burton started seeing how care is at the very base of a new sense of existence. She envisioned creating a space for collective care that would allow imprisoned women to transition to a real way out of the system: collective spaces offering housing, food, work, care, legal assistance, and collective healing for women and their children.

*A New Way of Life Re-Entry Project* combines a practice of affective support, education, legal counseling, healing, storytelling (Testif-i), and housing for recently-released women and the children who would otherwise be placed into the foster system. This has led to similar projects modeled after *A New Way of Life*— a recent example is the creation of *Hope House* in The Bronx, co-organized by two women who met in prison, Topeka K. Sam and Vanee Skyes, and supported by Susan Burton. In Fall 2018, Burton received an "Art for Justice" grant that provides material support to replicate *A New Way of Life* in different places. "We're calling it SAFE Housing Network," and it "will consist of homes throughout the country based on the model at ANWL." The possibility of sharing this experience and process has now crossed the ocean as a similar project, Wells of Hope, was launched in Uganda. The creation of local collectives led to the creation of a national collective, the *National Council of Incarcerated Women and Girls*, to provide a shared space for connecting experiences, initiatives, and support. The National Council has sponsored many initiatives, such as the Sentencing Project, Clemency, and the Community Defense. Once a year, the *National Council* holds the "Free Her" conference, where formerly incarcerated women and supporters from all over the country meet up. They have also participated in international gatherings, with affinity groups like YoNoFui.

Andrea James, founder of the *National Council*, formerly incarcerated, explains how necessary these gatherings were to concretize the international and systemic nature of this problem:

We have participated in convenings in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, the Caribbean, and at the United Nations. Whether in Chicago, the Bronx, Roxbury, Appalachia, or lower Alabama, the stories of American women who have experienced incarceration mirror those from Mexico City, Canada, or the favelas of São Paulo. Everywhere, women tell stories of persistent struggle with being cash-poor. These women are mothers navigating chronic food and housing scarcity. Their stories involve racism, unfair labor practices, over-criminalization, addiction, and a drug war that for decades has targeted their communities, creating continuous social and economic disruption. All too often, it is this disruption that led to their incarceration. Most disturbing are their stories of both witnessing and suffering physical trauma and sexual violence, often starting in childhood. In the United States, three-quarters of women in prison 'have histories of severe physical abuse by an intimate partner during adulthood, and 82% suffered serious physical or sexual abuse as children' (786).

By underlining the systemic nature of this multiple abuse-to-prison pipeline, which includes socio-economic abandonment for many women throughout the world, Andrea James talks about the necessity of connecting these experiences with a vision towards prison abolition: the call to trust and invest in community-led solutions instead of continuing the abuse in the prison system. In a recent *Survived and Punished* conference, the sister of a woman who was incarcerated because she defended herself when her husband was about to kill her said something that summed the problem up. Telling the participants in the conference about the kids, who miss their mother and do not understand what is going on, their aunt said: "after all the years of abuse, now the State is continuing the task of the abuser". The prison cannot help someone to heal. As Andrea James continues explaining the role of the *National Council* in creating a path toward prison abolition: "This is why we work from a prison abolition framework to end the incarceration of women and girls. [...] although incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women have been written off as either victims or criminals, they are courageous, resilient and brilliant, and steadily rising in leadership as agents of change" (786-7).

The near-zero rate of recidivism among the women involved in the five Los Angeles-area houses that make up *A New Way of Life* indicates the crucial importance of social relations and community support, the creation of a net of trust and collective (not merely individual) self-determination, in building a way out of imprisonment. Moreover, it underscores the role of *care* and the work of *building communities of care*. Finally, this fact testifies to the possibility of the coexistence of different levels and scales of economy, instead of just one. By this I mean forms of cooperative living and the development of solidarity economies that allow women to survive and to occupy meaningful roles within a community, instead of being constantly threatened and surveilled. Through these experiments, one can also see a form of collective resistance and struggle against the gender roles that affect women who have been imprisoned. In these reconfigurations of experience, communal ways of doing help build other subjectivities and work through the widespread suffering inflicted by gender stereotypes.

## Conclusion

This article examined forms of prison abolitionist thought and their relation to contemporary revolutionary feminist practices that explicitly address social reproduction. Through my study of these practices, I aimed to demonstrate how imagining alternatives was linked in part to the to discussing forms that abolitionist struggle could take in the temporal frame of the "now." This involves an interruption of more traditional forms of temporal imagination that are usually at work when change is approached teleologically. I follow Critical Resistance's proposed abolitionist vision as

a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment. Abolition isn't just about getting rid of buildings full of cages. It's also about undoing the society we live in (...) *An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different.* It means living this vision in our daily lives (emphasis added).

Consistent with this proposal, the experiments I bring together here deal with a perception of change that avoids the fetish of a miracle coming solely from above; instead, social transformation is envisioned as an *ongoing* praxis and process in which, as problems are tackled, new problems and

contradictions are born. Part of our role as thinkers/activists is to open up forms of imagining abolition as a complex practice that is permeated by the contradictions and tensions of the society that we attempt to leave behind. A struggle for prison abolition means a long-term struggle for systemic change, one that forces us *to push* the limits imposed on us as we try to imagine alternatives to the naturalized violence of imprisonment.

I would like to think here of "freedom struggles" in terms of paths of thinking—as a process of walking a path of real, yet small, possibilities that can look towards present and future times. The problem at stake is usually *where* to start, and *how* to begin building paths that would make abolition more feasible. Here we have a series of challenges, one being how to work at *undoing the abstraction on which the ideological function of the prison is made to work* as the "abstract site into which undesirables are deposited" (Davis, 2003,16, emphasis added). Another challenge has to do with thinking through the temporalities that social and collective change take, *or* could take, outside of the linear forms in which we are trained to understand them. Usually, we conceptualize change in terms of a line leading from a "before" to an "after." But what if abolition implied a complex set of smaller-scale efforts that, working in conjunction, pave the way to another form of social life?

In his book *Freedom Dreams*, Robin D.G. Kelley writes:

Unfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they "succeeded" in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative *visions and dreams that inspire* new generations to continue to struggle for change (ix; emphasis added).

From small exercises in collective care, language, and imagination to the possibility of creating different social relations from which a sustainable life without imprisonment could take place, we see strategies that allow us to think about the direction of change. Here, I find useful an example posed by Silvia Federici in "Wages against Housework," pointing to a crucial difference that we need to have in mind when we are talking about the directionality of change, of how we build when we are looking for ways of revolutionizing social reproduction:

It is one thing to set up a day care center the way we want it, and then demand that the State pay for it. It is quite another thing to deliver our children to the State and then ask the State to control them not for five but for fifteen hours. It is one thing to organize communally the way we want to eat (by ourselves, in groups), and then ask the State to pay for it, and it is the opposite thing to ask the State to organize our meals. In one case we regain some control over our lives, in the other we extend the State's control over us (21).

This difference is key to distinguishing between a mere "re-adaptation" of a problem and a transformation of the conditions that make a way out possible and it is the question of how we work on different forms of social relations at the community level.

This point also bears on how we understand the different forms of cooptation undertaken by nonprofit organizations and the ways in which they just fill in the spaces that the State left empty by positing a "charity" model through which corporations avoid paying taxes. Here INCITE's *The Revolution Will Not be Funded* offers an analysis of how the non-profit industry starts to determine the direction and dynamics of groups. Further, "Key concepts with the Emerging Model of Nonprofits" in Dean Spade's *Normal Life* looks at how nonprofit funding is usually directed towards a "service" model that loses connection to "any political mobilization aimed at getting to the root causes of the need for these services" (97). In the cases that I analyzed here, I find that there is an opportunity to see different collective processes of self-determination and community-based and cooperative ways of doing that express the need for different forms of social relations. I emphasize this because there is no clear way out without the creation of a different form of power that expands through cooperative social relations, able to account for vulnerability, different abilities, and interdependence.

At present, the question of violence and justice forces us to consider alternatives to the multiple levels of brutality, impunity, and violence against women that are sustained by everyday interpersonal and institutional relations. This is putting the question of power at the very center of the picture. Nevertheless, the question of how to reconceptualize justice in such a corrupt system can also have a paralyzing effect—where do we start? Here, more than ever, the feminist methodology that Angela Davis proposes for feminism and abolition in the twenty-first century is telling —it prompts us to look at small scenarios of change, and to forge the less "normative" aspects of existence from there. Chris Dixon calls this a "prefigurative praxis," meaning "the ways people in struggle both put prefigurative

aspirations into practice and develop, from our practices, those prefigurative aspects that are already present" (84). This involves dealing with the tensions and contradictions at stake in bringing together the "refusal of domination with affirmative commitment to building *new social relations and forms of social organization in the process of struggle*. It aspires to fuse the "against" – our rejection of ruling relations and institutions – with the "beyond" – our creation of new ways of being, relating, and doing" (83; emphasis added). As Dixon states, the most common critique of this politics argues that these practices are condemned to be "small scale," and/or that their sole power relates to the task of envisioning. However, the question that we should start posing is not so much about this limitation—which leaves aside the role played by the creation of *new social relations in prefigurative politics*—but about how we can start projecting small-scale change to large-scale change in ways that are not necessarily limited to the framework of the State.

As Vikki Law has pointed out, a challenge of the so-called #metoo era is to be able to look at alternatives to many forms of gendered violence and to also understand that, in contrast to the falsely "universal" character of the law, "processes of community accountability are messy and rarely follow a uniform path (...). Regardless of what forms they take, continuing to explore alternatives to state violence in response to gender-based violence is an essential piece of the movements to end both" (Law). From the experiences of freedom struggles analyzed in this article, I find inspiration in seeing how we can go from small exercises in language and imagination to the possibility of creating different social relations and forms of collective existence from which a sustainable life 'after' imprisonment can take place. These experiences allow us to see the beginning of *everyday forms of collective self-determination that insist on working through the connection between the inside and outside of the prison*.

In this sense, temporally sustained processes of resistance and/as forms of commoning serve as illustrations of Maria Mies' and Vandana Shiva's reconceptualization of freedom, without domination or abusive or instrumentalizing relationalities. It is thus critical to connect the current climate that the new feminist tide has created to a broader process of building a common language, memory, and knowledge. From this vantage point, we can look at instances in which opposition to capitalist regimes of expropriation have worked in tandem with the desire to envision and embody other forms of organizing collective life. That is, we can understand "opposition" not only as the act of resisting and struggling against, but also as the opening of a collective imagining of other forms of social life and political agency.

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