

THE BARNARD CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

THE SCHOLAR AND THE FEMINIST XXXI

ENGENDERING JUSTICE: WOMEN, PRISONS & CHANGE

APRIL 8, 2006

AFTERNOON PANEL
CHANGING ACTIONS

Janet Jakobsen: Good afternoon. I hate to break into all this excited conversation, but we ran over in the morning and I want everybody to get a chance to get involved in our panel this afternoon. I'm Janet Jakobsen. I'm Director of the Center for Research on Women here at Barnard College.

I want to welcome you back to this afternoon's session of the 31st Annual Scholar & Feminist Conference, this year -- Engendering Justice: Prisons, Activisms and Change.

On to this afternoon's panel. This morning we asked -- why? Why is it that we find ourselves in a situation in which social issues are dealt with through the strategy of imprisonment? We were then able to connect, at lunchtime, these various issues to questions of imprisonment.

So, how do we make the connections that Julia was talking about this morning, between working on prison issues and working on the issues that lead to imprisonment? And this afternoon,

we're going to ask -- how? How do we make a difference? How do we make change? How do we change what we do?

And we're very excited because the woman who makes things different here at Barnard College, the President of Barnard College is here to welcome you to this conference, as she is every year, and to introduce our panel. Judith Shapiro, President of Barnard College.

(applause)

Judith Shapiro: I should say first that the only reason I was not on time to welcome you at the very beginning of the day, is because another program -- we always have multiple programming going on here in Morningside Heights, of which you would also surely approve -- was also going on this morning. It is also the day of Columbia Community Outreach where the students of Barnard and Columbia work with various neighborhoods on projects of great merit. So, there was a very good reason.

The other thing I should note is that, in the context of the events announcements and special feature announcements that Janet just made, it's kind of interesting to think that to our wonderful, lively, intelligent, committed, feminist current students -- second wave feminism is something of an historical period.

And some of us feel that it was our lives. But in any event, I think that to the extent that this brings together

these events, feminists and committed activists of different generations, this is really one of its major, major contributions. Because there's quite a great chain of being and a tradition to be followed there.

So I'm delighted to be here this afternoon, to open this second panel of the 31st Scholar & Feminist Conference. The day has already, I know, proven to be quite compelling in keeping always with the very high level of exchange that has been a part of this conference's history.

The Conference is really a touchstone and centerpiece of the Center's programming. And I'm sure that this panel, "Changing Actions," will add much to the challenging discussion about prison activism. Now, as certainly you know, there has been a great deal of focus in the press on changing the Rockefeller Drug Laws.

And while our political leaders have seen fit to enact the most obvious of changes, allowing for the resentencing of individuals who have suffered -- I should say, some individuals -- unduly from the harsh penalties of these laws, this is only a start to the kind of reform that is needed.

Meanwhile, outside the vision circumscribed by this kind of legislative change, a wide variety of transformative work is underway. We have brought together some of the people who are

focusing their energies and talents on this issue, on the goal of bringing about much-needed reform.

From young women, working in their own communities, to those working to change the experience of re-entry to society. To those who hope to address drug treatment issues in new ways. The panelists are united in their commitment to moving beyond the destructive cycle of crime and punishment that has become the norm.

Rebecca Young, Assistant Professors of Women's Studies at Barnard, will serve as moderator for the panel. Professor Young is a long-time activist for peace and social justice. From her work in the 1980s -- although she doesn't look old enough to have already been at work in the 1980s -- as an AIDS educator in Washington D.C.'s jails and prisons; to her ongoing support of Drop The Rock -- a program to repeal the Rockefeller Drug Laws in New York state, Bec is an expert on the topic at hand.

She received her Ph.D. from Columbia University in 2000, in sociomedical science with a focus on gender and sexuality in science and medicine, and social epidemiology. She has served on the board of Sister Outsider, a Brooklyn organization run by young women of color that focuses on leadership development, job training and youth justice.

Most recently, her work on lesbian and bisexual women drug users was included in the 2006 Amnesty International Report

about ongoing police abuse and misconduct against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans.

And so, it is my pleasure to turn the program over to Beck Young.

(applause)

Rebecca Young: Thank you, Judith. I have a very bad cold, so I'm hoping that you can hear me anyway; I might sound like I'm talking from under a glass of milk or something, but I'll do my best. This afternoon's panel is going to pick up, as Janet said, where the morning left off.

And I just wanted to give you a tiny bit of context, which is that in being in touch over the last week or so, I asked the panel to just think about a couple of different questions.

One -- to let us know what exciting or interesting, inspiring work they are doing now, and if people felt more or less inspired and excited by their own work. And that will be something that will definitely come out.

But the other thing which was key that I think really generated a lot of interesting responses and questions to all of ourselves and each other was -- what does prison activism have to do now, to change itself? How do we have to change in order to move forward in ways that we haven't yet imagined?

We've slightly changed the order from what you have on your program, so I'm going to go ahead right now and introduce all of

the panelists in the order that they will speak. There's more information in the written bios than what I'm going to be able to give right now.

Alex Lee is an attorney and the founder and director of the Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project -- a non-profit organization dedicated to ending human rights abuses against transgender and gender-variant and intersex people in prisons and jails. He's a transgender man of Chinese and Taiwanese descent and currently lives in San Francisco with his partner.

Vivian Nixon became a member of the College and Community Fellowship -- a re-entry program for formerly-incarcerated people in New York City, in 2001. From 2003 until recently, she served as Executive Director of that program. In that capacity, she oversaw the project and provided direction with regard to various activities including academic support, leadership development and advocacy.

She took leave of that directorship upon receipt of the prestigious Soros Justice Advocacy Fellowship, awarded by the Open Society Institute. Her primary work as a Soros Fellow is to provide social justice education to religious leaders of the First Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

In addition to her work as a Soros Fellow, she serves on numerous boards and committees, including the Center for Leadership Education After Re-Entry, known as CLEAR, at the City University of New York Graduate Center for the Study of Women and Society. And the Re-Entry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

She is a frequent public speaker -- panelist, moderator and preacher. She recently published a chapter titled "A Christian Response to Incarceration -- Unbind Them" in the Beacon Press anthology Getting On Message: Challenging the Christian Right From the Heart of the Gospel. I encourage you all to find and read that chapter. It's incredibly smart and moving, and really, really sharp.

Deborah Peterson Small would like us all to know that she is a native New Yorker, whose political education and social activism began very early. I'm going to skip over a lot of those early years, just to say what she's been doing in the past eight years.

Ms. Small has been at the forefront of the national movement, seeking to challenge our nation's failed drug policies. She helped bring public attention and legal support to the victims of the Tulia[?] Drug Sting and prosecutions. She works tirelessly to promote reform of New York's infamous Rockefeller Drug Laws and helped to organize community support

for ballot initiatives, requiring treatment instead of incarceration for non-violent drug offenders.

Ms. Small is a nationally-recognized leader in the drug policy reform movement and has been a major catalyst in engaging communities of color and their leaders, in addressing the negative impacts of the war on drugs in their communities.

Two years ago she founded a new organization entitled "Break the Chains: Communities of Color and the War on Drugs." The mission of Break the Chains is to help build a movement in communities of color in support of drug policy reform, with the goal of replacing our failed drug policies with alternatives based on science, compassion, public health and human rights.

Fourth, we will have Ije Ude, who is a member of Sista II Sista, a collective of working-class young and adult black and latina women, building together to model a society based on love and liberation. S II S is committed to fighting for justice and creating alternatives to systems by making social, cultural and political change.

Ije is also a collective member of INCITE! -- Women of Color Against Violence -- a national organization committed to building a revolutionary women-of-color movement. She is a lead trainer and leadership team member with Generation Five. Gen Five is another group, I would encourage you to go check out

their website for brilliant alternatives to prison and policing, responses to sexual violence against women.

And she supports their work to create transformative approaches to dealing with child sexual abuse, as they say -- responses that do not rely on the state. Ije is also involved in other projects in New York City that are creating alternative spaces for women of color, and other marginalized communities such as the Pachamama[?] Child Care Cooperative, the Community Birthing Project and Harm-Free Zones.

Ije is also an eclectic Taurus and lover of life, justice, music and other beautiful things.

And finally, we have Kai Barrow . . . let's see, where will I begin? I'm only going to give you part of Kai; you'll have to read the rest in the bios. Kai was born at the tail-end of the '50s and raised in Chicago by activist parents. She can't remember a time when she wasn't politically active and involved.

Most of her work has been in the criminal justice arena. In the late 1970s, she began organizing around the issues of political prisoners in the United States. And she's been a member of several organizations and coalitions that focus on prisons and policing.

She comes to the field as a prison abolitionist and she is presently the Northeast Regional Coordinator of Critical

Resistance -- a national grass roots organization that fights to end the prison industrial complex.

So, you can see that we have an incredibly experienced and smart panel, so I leave it to them.

Alexander Lee: First, I want to say that, as you can tell, my bio is a lot shorter than anyone else's bio. It's because I'm in the company of incredible people, so I just wanted to say thank you for including me on this panel. I feel very humbled.

There are two questions that Rebecca asked us to think about. One was -- what's exciting to us now? And the other one was -- what can we do, well, I interpreted the question to be, what's to be done beyond prison reform?

My name is Alex Lee and I am the current Director of the TGI Justice Project which is based in Oakland, California. But we work in Oakland and in San Francisco.

And this organization's goal is to end human rights violations against transgender, gender variant and intersex people -- I'm going to just call them TGI for brevity's sake -- using short and longterm strategies that benefit all people in prison and outside of prison.

And there are two ways we do this. I'm talking about short-term and long-term because they are relevant to the second question. The short-term goals that we're looking at now is --

alternative sentencing, very specifically, in the Bay Area criminal justice context.

So what that looks like specifically is to improve access to services before conviction. So for folks who are sitting in jail who have been arrested, but are pre-trial and haven't been convicted yet, there are reasons why they are where they are. Some reasons are beyond anyone's specific control, like racism and racial profiling.

But there are other things that could be done to improve access to services. So even if at that time they were arrested, they didn't have access to these services, when they are out of jail -- and this is the goal, is to get them out of jail, get them out of the prison track -- that there are places for them to go.

So in San Francisco, there are actually some really interesting things happening in terms of alternative sentencing. The TGI population is really forgotten about. There is this separate housing unit in the San Francisco County Jail. So that part, the sheriffs and the people who detain people, they know that this is a specialized population and all that.

But a consequence of being isolated is that those folks are actually cut off from all services. So, they don't have jobs; they have periodic access to the library. They can't even go to

drug recovery. There are all kinds of things they are just completely shut out of.

So this part of the project is focusing on getting people hooked up to services that exist outside of prison and jail, because there are those in San Francisco. So the idea of this thing, the overall goal is actually lower the number of people who are going into prison.

The second part of it is the long-term aspect of our work, which is -- to empower the people who are most affected, meaning TGI prisoners, our allies and community members -- to make long-term change. And what that looks like specifically is that TGI prisoners become leaders in this work that we're doing.

And because they are literally under the gun, there are numerous things that allies can do to support them. We're trying to work out a model where TGI people who are currently in prison can actually articulate the solutions and come up with the analysis, and doing it in ways that we circumvent some of the oppressive atmospheres.

Like, we are helping them organize without letting the prison know that's what we're doing. So, don't tell anybody.

(laughter)

We also act as an outside eye, so that the prisoners that we've worked with who are pretty much, all transgender women and most of whom are of color -- are being retaliated against for

what they are doing. And so, we act as an outside force to prevent and head off, and also publicize some of this retaliation.

So in that context I also work with a group of people who are outside of prison, who are allies. They are collectively known as the Transgender and Gender Variant In Prison Committee, otherwise known as TIP. And they are based in San Francisco. They are a separate organization from the TGI Justice Project.

But part of my work is to support their growth. One thing that the TIP Committee and the TGI Justice Project are working on together is community organizing around specific campaign goals. The goals of the campaign are not the ends of the work. Really, the community organizing and the campaigns are a process or processes where leadership development is happening, developing.

And also, as I said before, developing a model where outside allies can meaningfully support leadership development of people who are actually in prison, in any region. So the kind of thing that we are working on now is like -- everybody in this room could now go out and do it today. There's no reason why you couldn't.

Just to give you a little bit more on the campaign that we're working on -- the specific campaign we are working on right now is to end sexual assault and rape in prison by

creating non-punitive . . . and this is the hard part and I'll talk about that later . . . alternative housing for survivors of sexual assault and rape in prison.

Right now the current regime has people going straight to isolation after they report an incident, and that in effect, makes people not want to say anything. There's also no counseling. So someone who has been sexually assaulted or raped, they're just kind of left to their own devices or put in isolation.

The goals for this campaign were developed by TGI prisoners themselves, and the goals are still evolving as we work with them. And right now, because our attempts to engage with the prison administration has been flatly denied or ignored, we are working on a media campaign. There are some articles out there focusing on this.

What we're trying to do in all this work is to do this work, and especially the community organizing piece, using an abolitionist framework. So we're constantly negotiating what that means, especially with prisoners and people outside who are in crisis. So -- people who are being attacked, who are under the gun, who are feeling the heat right now.

Because the tensions that we're running into is -- how do you balance responding to the immediate need, immediate danger with an abolitionist perspective that takes into account

generations? That's another thing that we should really be thinking about here. As we're talking about conceptualizing what we're doing, is we need to start thinking generationally.

And that's why I like, from Generation Five which Pat mentioned earlier, the reason why they're called Generation Five is because they expect or want to, they plan to end child sexual abuse in five generations. That's roughly 100 years.

So folks should start thinking like that. So, beyond your lifetime, beyond your children's lifetime. But it is not necessarily . . .

Audience Member: Five generations?

Alexander Lee: End childhood sexual abuse in five generations. So we should also be thinking -- ending the use of prisons and creating a world without prisons within X number of generations, in hopefully less than five generations.

That leaves us the question -- we need to change about how we think about what we call anti-prison work. Because if you really think about why is it that we are sending all these people in droves to prison, the prisons aren't the problem. They're just the symptom of the problem. And they are also the end result of a whole 500 years of problems.

So prisons themselves are not the problem. That means, people who are working on housing issues, people who are working on any anti-poverty issues, people doing just general anti-

racism . . . those are all prison abolitionists. We should start referring to them as prison abolitionists, helping them understand that they are also prison abolitionists.

And really, reconceptualizing what we are doing as a mass movement. It's not just this particular sector. Everyone in this room is a subset of a larger group of people who care about justice in general. So all of those people are also prison abolitionists.

This is a critique of my own work and me, and organizations that I work with also because we always have the prison thing in there somewhere, talking about prison. Just putting that word in there already defines and separates us from the other people who are doing work that we need to build a world without prisons.

And so, I'm glad we started off with an abolitionist framework, because that actually eliminates a big chunk of my talk. I don't have to talk about that.

But the second question is, to go back to the tension that we're experiencing with immediate responses to immediate crisis versus long-term change. We're not at a place in society where we have institutional support for alternative solutions that don't involve the state.

I use the state specifically. I'm not going to say just prisons, or even just police. Because I actually believe the

entire legal system is the problem. And everything that entails -- and this is a longer conversation -- but through my training in law school, I concluded, as many people conclude, that the entire legal system sets us up for these problems.

So the institutions, the schools, the governments -- they are not supporting these alternatives. In fact, they are working against these alternatives. And so, we talked a little about this as a group before we came here, the panel members and I feel it to a certain extent also.

We feel like we're muzzled and silenced in a certain aspect of what we really want to do because there are actual consequences for really dreaming that big. So in the location of our work, when we're trying to deal with prison rape and abuse without falling into the reform trap -- Kay spoke this morning about what happens when you fall into the reform trap. Just being cycled over and over again.

So let's think positively then; well, sort of positively. In the work that we're doing right now, we are thinking -- okay, what can we do to end in-prison rape and assault against TGI people and people in general in prison?

The ideas that we have are -- 1) solutions should not require larger prison budgets. So anything that could lead to funding more prison guards, recruiting more prison guards; or sadly, training more prison guards. I say -- sadly -- because

that's a thing a lot of people say; a lot of prisoners say we need more training. It can lead to this direction.

And I'm from California; we have a \$5 billion prison budget and we have 33 prisons. That doesn't include private prisons. Clearly, there's too much money going into that direction. And -- this is the hot one that's actually more difficult for people to kind of grasp all the time -- solutions should not use isolation and punishment, even against prison staff.

So when prison staff act out and abuse people, our immediate response is they should be fired. That is a punitive, isolative act. I definitely feel that way a lot of the time. And so my challenge and the challenge in the work that we're doing, and I'm being challenged on this also is -- not to think that way.

So how can we confront staff abuse without ostracizing them, pushing them out? I don't know -- I'm asking you. But the plus of doing it this way is that in California we have a really strong prison guard union. That's the one thing that kind of blocks everything; every attempt to change anything. But if you go at them with a non-punitive way, they have no idea of how to respond to you. Because they are all about being punitive, being angry, reacting.

If you go killing them with kindness, they are going to be all disoriented, which is what we want.

(laughter)

Plus, they're a union. You have to really respect the fact that they are a union. So the community organizing work that we're doing is like a laboratory for figuring out these things. Like I said, it's something that everyone in this room should and can do, since we're all prison abolitionists, no matter what we do today, tomorrow, our day jobs or whatever.

You all can try things out with your family members, with your kids. If they act out, try to do things that are not isolative and punishing. But rather, radical inclusion. I'm going to basically stop there. Thank you.

(applause)

Vivian Nixon: First, I'd like to thank Barnard for having this great conference and certainly for inviting me. I'm going to talk about the work that I'm doing, that I feel is exciting. And that is -- addressing the destruction of the prison industrial complex from what might be perceived as a slightly different angle.

Addressing it from the point of view of trying to stop the prison from coming into the community, in the form of re-entry mania that we are experiencing in the United States now. And I'm going to talk about my work from a couple of different approaches, because I move between different worlds in my work right now.

The world of education, the world of religion and the world of public policy. I'm going to try to help you understand how I deal with the juxtaposition of these worlds in my work. And then, offer some suggestions about how we might do activism differently, based on what I've learned in my work and through dialogues with my colleagues.

I'm going to start first by talking about an organization I am currently on the Board of Directors of. And, as you heard earlier, was a student in and Executive Director of at different points in time. The College and Community Fellowship, which is housed at the Center for the Study of Women and Society at the Graduate Center of City University, New York, under the direction of Dr. Patricia Clark, who is a great friend and mentor.

I wound up at the College and Community Fellowship because after being released from prison, I went knocking on the doors of the traditional re-entry programs and found that I was getting a pretty standard response. And that is -- that even with 20 years of pre-prison employment history, some at the mid-management level, what I was being offered was a six-week job readiness program; and then, being told I had to work somewhere else, not here, but somewhere else for six months to a year, to prove that I was worthy to work in a re-entry program, as an entry-level job developer.

I decided then, that re-entry needed to be reformed, if not, destroyed. So I set out about trying to find a program or at least some allies that were more conducive to my way of thinking, and that's when I found the College and Community Fellowship.

What makes the College and Community Fellowship different? Well, at least then and hopefully forever, what made it different is that it's not about surveillance and control. Nothing in the model is about surveillance and control. It's about helping people who have been in prison obtain college degrees at all levels.

Associates, Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D. It's not about extending prison into the community by using criminal justice and punitive models. What it is about is using higher education as a primary strategy. It's not fixated on quick solutions that often lead to subsistence living, but never to long-term sustainability, and sometimes lead back to prison.

And another thing that's very different about it is that one of its principal goals is to use education as a path to leadership and a way to give voice to our concerns about the disparate effects of the prison industrial complex on our communities, on women of color, on transgender and non-gender-conforming people, and the poor.

CCF has done a study and we found that the recidivism rate for our participants is nil. But what's really important is that we don't care. We don't consider this our greatest achievement. Our greatest achievement is our ability and willingness to translate the personal power achieved through higher education into political and social capital in the hearts and minds of every student that comes to us.

And this effectively moves our students beyond mere existence, and into full community participation. Time goes fast.

And very briefly, I want to talk about a project that spun off from CLEAR. Some of the students from CLEAR wanted to get together in a more academic sense and form a research group that is called Community Leadership And Education After Re-entry. And we members of CLEAR are working to share our perspective on re-entry, drawing both on our experiences of imprisonment and on our experiences since leaving prison.

Our conversations are not about what to do for formerly-incarcerated women and men. Our conversations are not about how to fix them or how best to serve them. But rather, our conversations are an exercise to develop an authentic voice to contribute to the public debate about punishment, the prison industrial complex, mass incarceration, rehabilitation, re-entry -- and all the related problems, all the related idioms

that have been created to describe the position we now find ourselves in.

I'm going to skip and possibly risk not making sense -- to talking about what kind of changes I want to see happen in activism in general. Before I do that, I wanted to talk briefly about public policy and religion because I think it's important that we understand that not everybody who claims to be faith-based is Carl Rove. We're not all conservative, we're not all punitive and some of us really do read the Gospels and understand who Jesus really was.

And my job as a Soros Justice Fellow, is to teach religious communities where their roots really lie. They don't lie in punishment and retribution. They lie in forgiveness and redemption and healing. And that's what I'm doing now, as a Soros Justice Fellow.

And I'm also reaching out to other organizations in New York City and around, to work with them -- such as Break the Chains and womens prison associations to educate state legislators to think in those same terms. Not in punitive terms, but in terms of redemption and healing and restoration.

Because some of these state legislators are the same people that you find leading some of the more conservative faith-based movements. I'm quickly moving on to the things that I think we need to do, to change.

One -- we need to change the way we use data to talk about people. Recently, in CLEAR, we studied a new set of numbers that were released with the 700-page Re-entry Policy Council Report. And we looked at these numbers and it was -- 650 released each year. Three out of four -- substance abuse problems. Two out of three -- lack high school diplomas. Forty percent have no diploma. One out of three gets vocational training at any point. One out of three reports physical or mental disability.

Half have never earned more than 600 a month. With statistics like these being circulated, supposedly on behalf of prisoners in re-entry -- it's no wonder why they continue to be criminalized and demonized. They sound nothing like citizens ready to take up their lives outside of prison.

So we must change the way we use data to talk about the population.

Second -- I request that we support activities that promote the education and leadership development of people with criminal convictions. I will probably get a chance later to talk more about the policies, the legal barriers that are in place, to prevent people from getting an education after prison.

But there are those legal barriers and they don't make sense, and I can talk more about that later.

The third thing I request that we do is -- to keep the power dynamics of race, class and gender in the discussion at all times. Don't ever give up on it. Paradigms that call for radical change -- which is change that shifts the balance of power at the root -- rarely gained credence or support from the structures that are most threatened by them.

Theologian Robert MacAfee Brown notes that -- it is one thing to acknowledge intellectually that, if a system based on punishment and retribution applied disproportionately to poor people and people of color, only subjugates and destroys, then that system should go. But it is a different thing altogether, for those who argue that a system should go, to be prepared to surrender their own power, their own status, their luxuries and their advantage.

Yet, this is the kind of change that is necessary, otherwise re-entry reform of the criminal justice system, or activism within the criminal justice system will produce opportunities that further distinguish population, distinguishing the formerly incarcerated from those who police them or even work on their behalf.

This distinction is a racial distinction. Privileges with whiteness -- those who are not categorized as formerly incarcerated, where the epidermal identities are not the only feature by which the different categories come to matter.

And finally, we must keep our eyes on the prize and avoid the temptation to build additional structures such as re-entry, on top of an already-flawed foundation. Building yet another institution based on personal transformation and surveillance, and calling it re-entry, poses the danger both of strengthening the perception that all people who are sent to prison are evil, aberrant or sick people.

And of promoting the idea that leading such people to and through an externally-imposed method of transformation will address all that is wrong with the criminal justice system -- much less, the prison industrial complex. If we are serious about our desire to live in an open and just society, we must return to the radical understanding of social justice that was present in earlier outbursts of progressive and religious social and political reform in the United States and abroad.

The anti-war movements, labor movements, civil rights movements and human rights movements that precede today's prison activism never flinched at the opportunity to lift up the oppressed and hold the oppressor accountable. Nor did they hesitate to speak truth to power.

Our efforts to eradicate the prison industrial complex and to provide better opportunities for people affected by criminal conviction, and to repair the breach in the communities that have been devastated by systematic criminalization -- can only

be successful if they are linked to a deeper and broader movement for social transformation.

And I hope to get to say a few more things later, but I am out of time.

(applause)

Deborah Small: Good afternoon. I want to start off by saying that I feel really privileged and happy to be here this afternoon. I'm really sorry that I wasn't here this morning, to have the opportunity to hear the comments from Patricia Allard and Chino Hardin and Andrea Ritchie and Julia Sudbury.

I don't know Kay Whitlock. I do know the others, and I've had the privilege, I believe, in the course of the work that I've been doing over the last few years, of learning from all of you. And I just want to say that you've all been privileged to hear from some of the strongest feminist scholars out here, working on these issues, which I believe is a real privilege. So for me, it's an honor to be here.

(applause)

I wasn't here this morning because I actually spent the last two days attending a conference in D.C., of the National African American Drug Policy Coalition. And it's an interesting thing because, in talking about what is exciting about what I'm doing now.

It's exciting to me that this group exists; and yet, it's frustrating and disappointing at the same time, because the organization is made up of 26 black professional organizations -- from doctors to nurses, psychologists, sociologists, social workers, lawyers -- all of whom have come together to work on issues of drug policy reform.

And yet, they all are still in the punishment model of how you deal with drugs. And so, the principal conversation is -- how do you expand drug courts? How do you have more culturally-competent treatment? How do you divert more people away from prison?

But to have a conversation about the legitimacy of drug laws in the first place, or the appropriateness of punishing people for the fact that they are engaged in any involvement in drugs whatsoever, is a conversation that people don't really want to have.

And for me, it points to one of the essential problems, I think, that we face in our work -- is being able to encourage the redefinition of what is crime. Because so many of us and so many of the people that we deal with every day have grown up in a society that has been driven, politically at least, over the last 40 years, over a constant expansion of the definition of what is a crime, and the way that we should respond to it.

And for people of color, in particular, I think it's a very difficult issue psychologically because it goes beyond just how crime is defined, and goes to how we see ourselves in reference to the rest of the society, and the way I believe that we've been conditioned to accept the legitimacy of force as a method of behavior modification.

And so, whether or not you're talking about activities that people engage in that may cause some physical harm to others, or psychological harm to others -- we've all been programmed to believe that force is the way in which you change behavior. And so, getting out of that I think, to some degree is a the root of being able to change the relationship that people have to prisons, and the relationship that we have to the criminal justice system.

So when Rebecca asked us -- what is it that we're excited about? I was like -- well, the work that I'm doing right now, I'm kind of excited about because I think it's good work. We're reaching out to women legislators. We're trying to focus more on the impact of drug laws on women and children.

But if I had my druthers and could do what I thought needed to be done, I would be really getting together with people to think about -- what are the new forms of civil disobedience today? How can you really be subversive? Because I think that we're at a very critical time in our culture.

Much more critical than most people are aware of. And so many of the things that we've both grown up believing that we need to do in order to foster political change, when I look around I see that they're not as effective anymore. The fact that you can have a half a million women marching to D.C. on behalf of their rights and have that basically ignored in the political conversation and legislating -- tells us something about the way in which the political dynamic has changed.

The fact that Republicans woke up a couple of weeks ago and saw a few million Latinos marching around the country, and it made them pause. But it didn't make them stop. And in a large degree, the overall tenor of the conversation hasn't really changed.

I'm glad that I asked Rebecca to give me a little bit of a summary of some of the themes that were covered this morning because I do think that they're very relevant to so many of the conversations that are going on right now. The whole idea about the way in which we take everyday behavior and make it criminal as a way of both stigmatizing people, and justifying punishing them because we don't want to do the things or to take the responsibility for doing the things that we know we have to do.

I think one of the most difficult conversations that I had over the last couple of days was on the issue between, the balance between personal responsibility and societal

responsibility. People are more than willing to jump on the bandwagon of talking about personal responsibility -- and this came up in the context of a session we were doing about the hiphop culture.

But weren't willing to talk about the institutional factors that contributed to the things that they were complaining about. So I see that as a major issue and concern. Also, the degree to which there is a disconnect in the public's mind, between what's going on politically and socially, and what's happening economically.

And it's funny because I was coming here this morning and I was at the airport and this man came up to me and he was looking at the weather and he was like -- wow, this is horrible, this is like such freaky weather because it's warm one day and cold the next day, et cetera.

And I said -- global warming. And he's like -- yeah, why don't they do something about that? I said -- well, you know, why don't you all do something about it? I said -- the first thing you could do is stop driving that SUV. And he was like -- what, why would I want to do that?

I said -- well, because it's spewing off all kinds of bad gas into the air. And he said -- well, I don't think it's that; I think it's those satellites that they're sending up there.

(laughter)

And then he proceeds to tell me about how he can't get rid of his SUV because he likes to have it to drive around with a bunch of honeys. And he's like -- are you going to New York? I'm like -- yeah, but I don't hang out with men who call women honeys.

(laughter)

And for me, it was kind of indicative of like where we are. And similarly, I was watching a little bit of CNN while I was getting ready to go to the airport and they had this early, early morning program acknowledging whatever anniversary this is of the Oklahoma City bombing.

And they were talking about . . . it was a long documentary, going through the whole thing. But at the very end of it, Bernard Shaw was talking about the fact that he doesn't think that people ever really heal from something like this; that it's a permanent scar.

And I kept thinking to myself -- isn't this ironic? Here is a black man saying that people never heal from the effects of a domestic bombing in their city. And yet, we have no conversation about the fact that people of color and other marginalized people who've suffered for years, decades, hundreds of years -- that they are supposed to be healed.

We're supposed to be healed. We don't have a conversation about that injury, that scar that continues to last and play

itself out every day. So that, for me, was like indicative of sort of the schizophrenic thinking that we have in our society that I think that informs so much of our policy.

So in the four minutes I think I have left, I'm going to talk a little bit about the second question that we were asked which is -- what is it that we think that we need to do or change in order to increase the effectiveness of our work?

And I'll say for myself, over the last few months or so, I really found myself going back to my roots, actually, politically. I started out in my political work as a Social Democrat as a teenager in New York. And it occurred to me how little conversation we have in this society anymore, a critique of the capitalist system; and the fact that what we live in is not a democracy.

We have what purports to be a democracy, but it isn't actually a democracy in any real sense of the word. And so, if I could identify the thing that I think is most important for us to see the kinds of change that we want, I see part of what I need to do is to work on promoting freedom for those who don't know that they're imprisoned.

Because the distinction -- prison/not prison -- exists on a physical plane. And yet, it also exists on a psychological and a spiritual plane. And I think we're in a society that is

imprisoned, undistinguished as such -- imprisoned by the greed and selfishness and myopia that we are fed on a continual basis.

And all of the different ways in which we are institutionally structured to make ourselves believe that we are pursuing freedom and happiness -- when in fact, we're just making our prisons bigger and stronger. And it's funny because people don't see the fact that they're moving to live in gated communities, as a sign that they're not free.

They think that their money has given them the freedom to do that, but they are freeing themselves to live in bigger cages. And so for me, I want to challenge us all to think about ways to do our work on both a linear and non-linear level at the same time. The linear stuff is the everyday incremental reformist stuff that we have to do because 1) -- our funders expect us to; 2) because it's all we can do; 3) it's all that people can hear.

But at the same time, there's a level at which you can be working to transform society nonlinearly that's about speaking to people's experiences and their greater needs and desires. And I'm going to tell you this one quick story as an example.

I had a conversation recently with one of my sisters, who's a very intelligent and gentle person. And she's also very religious, but she's not homophobic and she's generally very

open to people. So we were having a conversation about same-sex marriage.

And I couldn't understand why she was opposed to it. And she kept telling me -- well, she felt it was one more way in which family life was being undermined. And my lawyer part of me wanted to start debating her about it -- that's not really true.

But then I decided that maybe what I just needed to do was listen. So I asked her to tell me why she felt this was so. And she started talking about the fact that she had to work so hard in order to live in an area that had decent schools for kids. But that because she did that, it meant that she didn't have time to be with them.

She and my stepmom are small business owners. They don't have health insurance. So she talked about the difficulty of that, and the constant worrying about anybody getting sick and not being able to get their teeth fixed and that kind of thing. She talked about all of the different ways in which, as a parent and as a woman, she doesn't feel supported.

And I said to her -- you know, if you lived in France or if you lived in Germany or if you even lived in Canada, they have universal health coverage. They have child care available for people from the point of birth. They take one-month vacations always. They work a shorter week. They don't worry about their

old age, how they're going to be able to take care of themselves.

I said -- maybe what we need to be doing, if you put as much energy into getting the things that you want from this government -- because we've all been brainwashed into believing that it has no responsibility to provide these things. As opposed to, if you put that energy into getting what you want, as opposed to keeping other people from getting what they want -- we would all be a lot happier, and you would find that some of those people that you've been working against, can be allies to you in getting what you want.

And so, if I would leave us all with anything, I think we have to get out of our silos and not just talk about the issues we care about. That we have to be continually connecting the dots for people, between the things that we're working on, and the broader issues about economics and power.

And finally, I think we just have to listen, listen, listen, listen, listen. Thank you.

Ije Ude: . . . share a project that we launched in 2002 called Sister Liberated Ground, which is really about creating a zone in Bushwick where violence against women wouldn't be tolerated, and share with you the vision behind that; how we set it up, what we've done and what we've learned in the process.

And so, I'll just start off, I'll just say a little bit about Sista II Sista. We're a community-based organization based in Bushwick and we're made up of young and adult Latino women who are committed to really modeling the type of world that we want to live in. So really thinking about -- what does liberation mean? And how do we begin to model that with one another; sharing each other true love, and really like building from that place?

We do this through really promoting the leadership of young women of color. And really looking holistically at how we can develop both ourselves and each other. And for us, holistically means not just like political education but also like spiritual, emotional, physical well-being. Like really having us reflect on what's happened to our culture and the stress within our culture and being able to use that and draw upon that.

And you said, to really think about creative ways to resist and express our resistance. And so, because we are really interested in modeling and looking at being the world that we want to live in, we have a collective structure that's really flat. There's not a hierarchy involved.

And when we go out and speak and do stuff, we try to do it in partnership. When we write articles we do it in partnership in the collective to really model that. And of course, it's harder; it takes more time, it takes more work. But in the long

run, it's more powerful because I feel it makes the work that we do more powerful.

The three principles that shape our vision and the work that we do and really are grounded in our vision around Sista Liberated Ground, are -- self-determination, interconnecting personal and social transformation; and collective action.

So the first piece around self-determination, what this means for us is really collectively being able to sit and dream; and imagine -- what is it that we want? And then, being able to really build access to the tools and resources is going to make that possible.

The second piece, second principle is -- interconnecting personal and social transformation. And what this is for us is really looking at how, it's not just enough to do organizing work and set up campaigns and think about strategies and tactics of what you're going to do.

It's also important because . . . I wasn't able to be here earlier, but I've learned that the history of prisons was shared. And she talked about how prison was actually a reformist act, like a liberal reformist creation. And so, looking at how, when we reform without healing, we inevitably re-create bits of the structures that we've internalized.

And when we don't acknowledge the trauma, what it's like to live in this world as a woman, as a person of color, as someone

who is oppressed and marginalized -- those pieces are still within us. And so, even when we do have the freedom or we win the campaign and we set out to do things differently or do things better, we don't end up really transforming.

What we just do is just kind of create it on a whole different level, just create an oppression in a different way. And so for us, really looking at healing is really important. And for healing to really be taken beyond the individual -- tell me your story, what happened in your childhood.

Well, really understand -- okay, what did what happened in your childhood, what does that have to do with systemically, the principles and the values and the practices that we all do every single day, that lead to situations and creations that manifest in violence in people's individual lives?

And so, really like having to do that deep self-reflection about -- okay, what are the pieces of this that I brought into it? What are the pieces I do every day? And for me, where I really experience this is in being a mother and being a parent to a child.

And just realizing the different ways that I don't even realize, that I just come from like a punishment mindset; and that even though I don't spank, when I raise my voice, even when I talk in a certain way or the little ways I may withdraw love -

- that's still part of the system that I think that I'm fighting against.

And so it's really looking at -- how do we shift our organizing to come from a place that's really coming from like, inspiration; it's really about like our emotional, like trying to heal. And about creating an alternative. And in doing that, part of what makes it really hard is 1) -- we have to be really imaginative and really creative; because we're doing something that we don't have any models out there, of what it is; or we can critique what's out there and list all the things that are wrong.

But when it comes to -- okay, what are we going to create in its place? We are really like struck; because part of what the trauma that we've lived in has done, is really like stunted our imagination. It's like the little child that's so excited about something and then just gets crushed.

And so, we're still living from that crushed place and in fact, we're almost afraid to like dream and hope and really imagine in that way, what a different world would be like, and what different ways of doing things related to one another are.

The next piece is around -- looking at collective action. And for us, collective action is more than just going to a march or a rally. But also like, what are ways that we can use culture and arts to also collectively speak against or create or

share our imagination, our vision of what it is that we want? Or what it is that we're moving towards?

And also, within that, also looking at -- what is accountability? A lot of times we think that accountability is something in here that we're going to do. Like, we're going to hold other people accountable. But what are the ways that we hold ourselves accountable? And what is it that really has people be accountable?

And at the end of the day, it's our relationships with each other. Which is why, when we come from a place that's like isolationist, where we're like -- okay, you did something wrong, you go over here. That's not really effective because you're isolating them from the people that they care about.

And it's our relationships that really inspire us to transform and want to do the hard work of healing and transforming our behavior. And so, what are the ways that we can really look at accountability as really being about relationship-building, and then, within the work that we do, really center around the relationships we have with one another, and how we work that through?

So I want to talk about how we came about creating Sister Liberated Ground. And it was really a vision that came from the young women themselves. Sista II Sista was founded in 1996, and

a lot of the work that we did in our first few years was around this holistic development.

And a lot of people were like -- what you're doing isn't organizing; that's not real organizing. You don't have a campaign, you don't have a target. And were like -- we knew that we wanted what we were going to work on, to really come from the community and really come from the young women. And not be something that we impose or we feel like -- oh, this is what we feel you need to do.

And so, in 2000, two young women that a lot of our members were closely related to; they either went to school with them or they lived around the way from them -- were murdered. One was murdered by a police officer and the other young woman was murdered by an auxiliary police officer.

And in having conversations around them, we just started having conversations about violence in general in young women's lives. And we were just struck at 1) -- like how much violence, when we're facing, in their homes, their most intimate relationships with people that they trusted.

And then 2) -- how the police weren't someone they wanted to go to because the police themselves were also enacting violence around them, against them. And so, it was like, looking at, how do we begin to think about 1) -- in the

meantime, what are we going to do? We've already recognized that the state is a racist, sexist, homophobic state.

It's not set up for our liberation and our self-determination. But what do we do, when we really have our loved ones, our next door neighbor, our parents -- are the ones that are enacting violence against us. Like who do we turn to and where do we go?

And how do we begin to look at creating this liberated ground and that vision? And we had four components that we knew we wanted to be integral to the creation of this freedom zone for women in Bushwick.

One was -- workshops and training. The second piece was -- an action line, which was our modification of a hot line. Not just where people call up for referrals, but also a place where people could call to be like -- okay, this is what's going on; what can I do?

And really being able to have us move beyond just being able to recognize -- okay, someone is harassing me, someone is stalking me; let me call the police or let me call someone else out there to come and take care of the situation for me; but I have this going on in my life, what can we all do about it?

And so, the other two pieces -- the cultural presence and the Sister Circles, and Morgan is going to talk more about that. We've got two minutes, we got our two minutes, just now.

Morgan: So the other two components was -- having a cultural presence with the young women within Sista II Sista that created the new DVD, which is around. It's called "No More Violence Against Our Sisters" and it deals with the various forms of violence that women of color face.

And it has both young women's perspective and an adult women perspective in the documentary; because it's telling different stories of women. And to take that and go on tour. Where are we having these conversations around violence, around prisons? It can't just stay in rooms like heady dialogue, and like, really big words.

It's not really accessible to everybody because what the movement is going to look like is -- everybody. So it's like, how do we shift that and make sure that people are talking about it? We're not all coming from the same place of understanding, like -- yeah, this society is bullshit, based on a lot of really messed-up things.

And so, the fourth piece, Sista Circles, which are spaces where young women came together to discuss their experiences with violence, their experiences with relationships. And 1) -- just breaking down the secretiveness and the silence that we have. Oh, we don't want to talk about that, we don't want to share that.

And how silence just like stays in our bodies and turns into emotional sickness, and then into physical sickness. So really, just wanting to start having healthy dialogue with one another, around where we're each at. So since we probably have about one minute left . . . before we came here, we wanted to figure out -- what's the last thing we're going to end on.

It's like -- a huge reality check that, the situation of, how are we changing our actions towards crime and punishment? And it's really like a pimple. You really have to get at the root of it. And the root of it lies in . . .

(laughter)

. . . you know, in order for that to really clear up, you've got to get to the nitty-gritty. And I feel like, that sometimes, what we're saying over here is we look at these institutions. And that's one of the reasons why we shifted our direction in organizing.

It was like -- okay, you can look at an institution and say, this is messed up and this is messed up and this is messed up. So what are you going to put in place? What are you trying to say? Are you trying to suggest something? How are we really trying to build? And that's the work that needs to be done.

That's the next step. If we're really trying to, right now -- yeah, where we're at in the world politically, economically, socially, culturally. There's a lot of stuff

going on and we really need to step our game up. And that is the responsibility . . . okay, they're giving me time.

I feel like it's my responsibility to tell you that it's everybody's responsibility in here to step inside of themselves and also -- to step outside of themselves.

(applause)

[Break in taping]

Kai Barrow: . . . that gives the police, but it's good because it gives us all a chance to talk. I'm standing up because I'm nervous and even though I talk a lot publicly, I also need to move around a lot. So I'm going to stand up because I was feeling kind of tight over there.

First of all, thank you to Barnard Center for Research on Women, and for convening this very important discussion and inviting me to share some of my thoughts with you. Thank you to the panelists. One of the benefits of being last is I can just basically say -- you know, what they said.

(laughter)

But I won't, but I will! So it's really good to hear a lot of the shared ideas. I feel very much in solidarity with a lot of what was heard. Before I start my comments, I'd like to take a minute to remind myself and to remind all of us actually, that struggle is protracted. That it's long-term.

And I think we're hearing that, and that's very heart-warming and also very inspiring to me to be thinking about it -- struggle and liberation in a very protracted way. It gives me strength and perspective to remember the freedom fighters that have come before us, and those who are yet unborn. And that we can nurture that, and we're building that as an organic process.

I recently relocated to Durham, North Carolina -- from Brooklyn, New York. And I went to Durham in December and I live on a quiet, tree-lined street that's in walking distance from 610 Buchanan Street. Some of you might have heard of this address and it might resonate with you because it's recently received a lot of notoriety as a place where a black woman, at least one black woman, was hired to be an exotic dancer at a party she thought there would be five people there.

It turned out to be about 46, at least 46. And she was gang-raped. She was strangled. She was sodomized. And she was verbally assaulted with racist slurs. And the people who did this brutality were members of the Duke University lacrosse team.

So that's walking distance from my house. And I've been involved in organizing on that right now. And as a survivor of rape myself, on my 19th birthday, I've been vacillating myself and many other people, between daily bouts of tears and fears and rage.

And I'm fighting the impulse -- I was raped by a cab driver -- so I'm actually fighting the impulse every day, to run from cabs. To run from men, and to run from sleep. Like, it's a process that I'm involved in, and I want revenge. I want revenge.

I'm also surrounded by a community of survivors, potential survivors and allies who also feel a lot of what I feel, and we also want revenge. We want justice and we want to figure out what that justice looks like. As a prison abolitionist, what does that justice look like for me and for my sisters?

People often look at me with disbelief when I say -- I don't believe in prisons. They say -- not for the child molesters? I say no. They say -- not for the serial killers? I say no. They say -- not for the corrupt cops? -- because they know I'm a revolutionary. I say no. They say -- not for the rapists? And I say no. No.

Because I don't believe that prisons actually solve our problems. It can't solve economic and social problems. It simply bolsters the systems of oppression that we're already under. So what are the other ways that we can do this?

I'm a member and staff person of Critical Resistance, which is a national, grass roots abolitionist organization. And in New York specifically -- though in other parts of the United

States -- Critical Resistance is working on a project called the Harm-Free Zones. And Ije just spoke a little bit about it.

We have very similar ideas around Harm-Free Zones. The idea of the Harm-Free Zones is to work with communities of those most impacted by the prison industrial complex, to reduce harm within our communities without relying on police, courts, prisons. So we're focussing internally on communities of ourselves.

Because we see that the prison industrial complex is not isolated. Somebody else spoke to that earlier, or everybody spoke to that earlier. Abolition itself has got to be a broad strategy.

So it's not just about getting rid of cages[?], it's also about transforming relationships. Do I really have to use that thing? I can't -- what's it called, the patriarchal podium? We anti-patriarchy today, people.

But the Harm-Free Zone that we've been working around developing is basically looking at how do we reduce harm that allows people to adopt a new way of thinking, to use our imaginations -- similar to what Ije spoke about. Because we're challenged to struggle with our own internalized oppressions and the limitations that are imposed upon us by the state.

The state tells us to think of ourselves in very narrow frameworks, and when we accept that and don't think outside of

that, we're not taking responsibility for creating and implementing and benefiting from our own liberation. So, our Harm-Free Zone is looking at ways to stimulate that. I probably don't have that much time, so I'll get into more detail as we get into the conversation.

But I would outline certain conditions that need to be met, in order for a Harm-Free Zone to actually flourish in our communities. In particular, we've talked about ongoing democratic dialogue, community investment, agreed-upon principles and practices, clear boundaries and roles and vision and hope. A fundamental desire for liberation and a belief that social change is possible.

Like, those are integral to doing any kind of community accountability. And within that, we've looked at processes or practices that we can utilize which are fluent, which are non-sequential, which are interconnected. Ways that we can have an impact on those principles. And I'll talk about those processes later in the discussion segment of this.

I think, to me, it's important for me to think about -- particularly now, because I'm struggling with this really hard. It's particularly important for me to think in terms of my own political values, my values. In addition, it's particularly important for me to think about those values in the context of what I see a future looking like for our society.

I like this idea of thinking about abolition in a time frame. Like, we've always said that abolition is a process. But to think about it generationally makes sense to me, and that's why I say our struggles are protracted. You know, one of the things that the prisons do, that the prison industrial complex does -- is that it keeps us all alienated from our own power.

And so, the notion of accountability becomes someone else's responsibility. So in this incident, which brings up all sorts of points for analysis and deconstruction -- I'm talking about the case in Durham, where we're looking at historical and colonial relationships between an Ivy League institution in a working-class community.

We're looking at the impact of institutionalized racism and patriarchy and misogyny and heterosexism and class capitalism. We are looking at entrenched narrowness of the Black Bible Belt -- she was an exotic dancer, what is she doing? -- in the role of women within the notion of the patriarchal Black Bible Belt.

It brings up all these issues. It also brings up this question of accountability. Right? And when struggling with something like this, I would posit that this is a moment where it's even more necessary to embrace an abolitionist response. Because as everyone from politicians to survivors are demanding

justice from the court system; demanding justice from the universities.

We're giving away our power, and we're relying on those institutions to give us the justice that only we can get for ourselves. So how do we do that? How do we impart that justice? Even when it's somebody outside of our communities? How do we gain our own justice and our power back?

And I would maintain that using those kinds of principles and practices that I just briefly ran through, with the Harm-Free Zones -- would give us the strength and the foundation to bolster ourselves, as what's happening now. I just moved there in December; I'm building community.

And it's bolstering me. It's the only thing, in addition to the folks I've reached out to here and in other places, that's getting me through -- is this community. And within this community of survivors and potential survivors and allies, we're developing long-term sustainability. We're invested.

And within that we then make decisions about what an appropriate action looks like. Direct action that we call for. It could be national, it could be local, it could be international. But we are setting the terms so that when that justice does happen, we're the ones who are empowered by it because we set the tone, not them.

And I would maintain that by doing this, by determining that justice that we seek, we are changing our values. Because we've reduced our dependency on the prison industrial complex and we've challenged this normalization. And so, in closing, I want to play a song for you, just a bit of a song -- because I just ran through some heavy stuff and this is kind of what gets me through.

And I'd like you all to take a moment just to honor all the survivors of sexual violence, the survivors of the prison industrial complex, the survivors of systemic brutality that violates us all -- and to just kind of listen to the words. Thank you. [Music is played.] Can we use this music somehow?

(applause)

[Pause in Taping]

Rebecca Young: . . . it's really amazing how this panel wrapped around to where the morning panel ended. And this place of finding where each of us wants to seek punishment, and where each of us is fundamentally suspicious of an abolitionist approach to justice and to solving problems of the harms that people do to each other, and that we see in our communities.

It's amazing. I'm going to take the liberty of saying one quick thing that I saw running through both of the panels. And that is -- several people mentioned the whole war on terrorism

in different ways that policing has been, that surveillance has been intensified.

And also, Chino mentioned the way that policing has become, not just a presence in New York City public schools and in a lot of urban schools, but sort of the main activity of going into and out of those schools.

The ways in which control and surveillance have gotten routinized and the ways in particular now, that virtually all kinds of policing and control -- and specifically drugs -- have gotten specifically linked to fears of terrorism. I think it's worth just noticing that as a habit that is one of those things that keeps us from what Ije was talking about and Kai also, and everybody.

Talking about -- how do we go back and reconnect with our values and question and notice, how do we sort of sit back and dream? And the last thing I wanted to mention was -- I was so pleased that so many people today talked about really radical approaches and the sense of commitment to abolition is so strong here today.

Because many, many, many people would hear the comments of the panelists and in the workshops and say that this is naive. And something that is really worthwhile to think about, I think especially as students who are often accused of being naive, a lot of whom are in the room.

That if it were so naive, it wouldn't be so threatening. And the fact that everybody who is doing this kind of work is really, really radical and threatening, is worth noticing. And I just want to applaud all of the incredible work of all the people on both of these panels. Thank you.

Rebecca Young: We do have a good bit of time for comments and questions. I do want you to use the microphone, so I'll bring it to you.

Audience Member: Hello. There's been a lot of recognition here today, and I believe everybody is here under hostility to the horrors that we see every day in this society. The horrors of racist oppression, the horrors of oppression of women. The horrors of unemployment.

But what's been offered here today is reform of the system which causes all of these things. Politically, what's been offered here is two options -- to make a harm-free zone. Or to have systems like the welfare system in France, in Germany or Canada.

There's no harm-free zone in capitalist America, or in any capitalist country. Inequality is caused by capitalism, by a system based on profit. And the only way to have a system that is rational, is for the profit system to be overthrown, for the working class to take power. To plan economy, to produce products on the basis of social need, and not on profit.

The prison system and the prison industrial complex is necessary for the maintenance of the Wall Street stockholders, for the Haliburtons, for the Democratic Party politicians and for the Republican Party politicians. If you look to New Orleans, you will see -- and if you look at any inner city in this country -- there's no free zone.

New Orleans is a vivid example of what capitalism means. And the other example I want to give of the prison industrial complex, that has not been mentioned here today and it's really amazing that it's not -- Mumia Abu Jamal[?], who is the foremost class war prisoner in this country . . .

Speaker: It was mentioned.

Audience Member: . . . I'm sorry. Okay, I didn't hear it. What I want to put forth is that the only way that Mumia can be released is for class struggle politics. For the transit workers in Philadelphia, for the transit workers in New York City -- to go on strike. For that kind of mobilization to happen. There is no justice in the capitalist courts.

And the organizations in this country that have mobilized on the basis that Mumia could get a fair trial, told you a lie. It's not possible. What's needed is class struggle. Wednesday night, there is an organizing party . . . I'm with the Spartasus[?] League and the Spartasus Youth Club . . . you're

not surprised! That's good, because we're the only ones who say this.

It's not speaking truth to the ones who have power. It's speaking truth to the working class. That's what's needed. That's why a revolutionary party is needed.

[Pause in Taping]

Audience Member: This is a question about how to introduce somehow a prison abolitionist agenda or something like that, into some kind of prison advocacy work. We are coming from upstate New York, central New York, and we're advocating for health care in county jail. Not in a prison, but in a county jail.

And so, maybe I'd like to have help in how to think about how to do that, not in your critical reformism, something like that. How would it be more of an abolitionist way to advocate? I'm not going to give you the details of how we work, but it's working with prisoners to advocate for better prisons.

Secondly, in a related vein, coming out of that work we're also finding that a lot of the local parole officers are really very overly-aggressively violating parolees and sending them back to prison. And then also, kind of stalking women and

really treating them really badly and very invasive and things like that.

And then, a lot of the women and some of the men too, when we're working against the parole office, they will be like -- we want those guys fired. But then, I heard that Alex Lee was critical of that. And more generally they would say things like -- okay, fine . . .

(laughter)

. . . no, but that's serious. Like, how do we take that up? Also more generally they would say things like -- okay, if you've done a crime and you've violated parole, fine; but not for these small things. But then, I think the ambitions of this panel is more than just -- okay fine, if you violated your parole, you should be sent back to jail.

So they have a kind of normative idea in that respect, right? Like if you did a big thing, you should be sent back, but not for the small things. So then, how do I sort of push the agenda past that?

Rebecca Young: Okay, the second person who had their hand up?

Audience Member: I definitely don't have an answer for this, but I'm curious if any of the panelists think that there's anything in particular about our historical moment, and trying to envision abolitionist solutions? I'm thinking about two

different comments -- one of Deborah Small, talking about how half a million women march in D.C. and it doesn't even make a blip on the legislative debate.

And then, in my own life I turn abolitionist models when I began to really struggle with trying to have hope and trying to have imagination within other political strategies and other political movements. But then, very quickly, getting involved in abolitionist organizations, realizing that abolitionist politics have been around much longer than prisons.

And abolitionist prison organizing has certainly gone back a long, long ways. And trying to think about how the evolution of abolitionist models, of struggles, of movements -- fits into historical shifts. And particularly fits into kind of, right now a crisis, of a lot of hopelessness that I experience in social movements.

A lot of desolation and struggle. People to really be able to imagine a different kind of world. And as that's feeling more and more impossible, it also -- for a lot of people I know, is feeling more and more urgent.

Audience Member: I have a question kind of following up for Deborah Small, as well -- when you're talking about new civil disobedience. I'm just curious, what does that look like to you and how that takes form? I spend a lot of my time

working on resources for queer folks in prison, directly to them and for people working with other folks in prison.

I'm trying to find out who else is doing that work, other than you, who else you know is doing work. Because it seems like it's one of the populations within prisons that's superunderserved, that all are underserved. How do we provide resources in abolitionist ideology and intent, but also meeting people's needs to keep them safe while they're stuck in those cages?

Audience Member: Just a question for as many of you as possible -- a few of you talked about the arts and music working side by side with some of the more reformative things you guys were working on. So I wanted to hear about some of the more creative things you've seen happening with this type of work.

Audience Member: Hi. I think partly this might be for Kai. In terms of community, you were talking about some of the steps that might be a part of that. I was wondering how you would try to define community in terms of for instance, would it be around local or survivors, or depending on what the situation is?

And also, maybe this is about the division between long-term and short-term goals, but in terms of media and how stories get appropriated and put back into these traditional narratives

of justice and how to keep that abolitionist framework when apparatuses are ready to take it out of that?

[Pause in taping] [[[alexander lee responds]]]

Audience Member: My question is, and I appreciate everyone's comments -- the people who have been on the panel, the workshops, folks who have just come out without official positions. My question is primarily for Kai, Ije and Morgan. And also, for any others who have stories of this. I would like you to share some actual stories that have come out of the harm-free zones in terms of how specific issues or problems have been dealt with within the community, in a community-based way.

Whether it's using the action lines or whatnot. But a couple of different stories that you can share. Just to show us how they work and kind of operationalize the concepts for us?

Speaker: So, in terms of SLG[, there was an instance where a young woman had been stalked by this man for two years. And it had gotten to the point where it was the summer time and he was getting exceedingly aggressive. And she was afraid to go home. She didn't want to go home without somebody else.

And so that was one of the things that she shared with SLG. And SLG -- Sista Circles is not just about sitting and sharing your experiences. But it's also about how you're taking steps to create action around it. So they created this plan to

confront him. And they went to the barber shop that he worked at.

Her father had gone to the man and he wasn't sure how he wanted to go about it because he really just wanted to hurt him. So how do you address violence with violence? Now this is years later and there aren't any more cases of him following her and she feels much safer.

And I think just knowing that. The community of men in the barber shop who were like -- yo, if this happens again, he's going to get fired. But there was this connection around how people saw that it was wrong.

But on the flip of that there's another instance -- there was a pregnant woman who was being dragged outside of Sista II Sista. There were a bunch of us in the office and we were like -- okay, let's go out there, what are our steps going to be? First we were talking to the guy and then we're talking to the woman.

And the woman is like, after a while she's like -- I just want my bag back so that I can go. But then in the end, there were folks who were just like -- you all just really need to mind your business because it has nothing to do with you. You know what I mean?

And so it's two different places and two different cases where it's like -- you have a different response from the

community. Which I feel like when you're a part of something that's really trying to challenge how people see violence and what's their definition of it and what are their connections with it?

It's harder. Like there isn't really, I can't really give you an operational thing of how it goes because I don't believe that people are blueprinted like that. That you're going to come across a whole plethora of things and then there will be a plethora of things that happen that are going to be the responses of it. So that's just our . . .

Kai Barrow: I haven't seen you in like, years. Look at you! Looking pretty. The whole thing with the home-free zone that we've been developing in New York is that we're in a development stage. So we haven't actually begun to put things into practice in community yet. What we have done is we've outlined a lot of principles and practices that we think are important to make us question -- well, what is community? And what kind of criteria would we need to be able to actually be effective in community?

So we've been in that process, and we've been in the process of researching models. So we've got models that talked about these processes. We see the harm-free zone of being processes of prevention, intervention, reparation or repair and transformation.

And we've started looking at these models from around the world, of different groups that have incorporated some level of these kinds of practices in some way shape or form, to deal with harm. From the kachacha[?] system in Rwanda, which we're looking at maybe a potentially reparation model, which is dealing with genocide in Rwanda; to Sisters' Liberated Ground in terms of intervention or prevention models.

The idea that we've looked at here though, is that all of those processes, like I said, are interconnected and they are fluid. So it's not hierarchical; it's not linear. So you don't just -- okay, we go in and we prevent, meaning, we insure that basic needs are met for everyone in the community and that information is accessible to the community.

And then we will intervene, if push comes to shove. Meaning, we'll do something like ostracize somebody or whatever; or physically put our bodies between themselves. And then we'll repair; we will make them give us sanctions. And then we'll transform; we'll be new people.

We're thinking like, it can't happen in such a linear way. All of those things have impact upon each other, so they have to happen simultaneously. If people are interested, I would ask you to go to the Wiki[?]. Don't get me to try the hell to say what a Wiki is. But it's like electronic stuff.

Our Wiki address -- somebody else can be more articulate -- is www.harmfreezone.org. So it's all one word. The thing with the wiki is that it allows for conversation. So you could look at some of the things that we've put forth -- like a vision, mission, some of these principles and practices. And you get feedback to it and we can begin a dialogue on it.

So I would encourage folks, if you want to have some feedback on that, to please go into it. Also, we're doing round tables and conferences and just trying to get as much feedback from people before we launch. Sorry I took so long.

Rebecca Young: I'd like to make sure that I see all the questions before I . . . because maybe I'll gather a few of them. There is one back here. I think I'm going to take a note from Janet. I'm going to gather those five questions first and then have the panel respond to them. Okay?

[Break in taping]

Alexander Lee: A couple of times my name was mentioned, personally. I go by Alex -- you don't have to call me Alexander Lee every time you see me.

The first question -- how to introduce prison abolition through prison advocacy, especially working with prisoners and around specific material things like health care? First, I want to clarify -- I personally don't know where I am currently at in terms of the whole firing of cops as a solution.

I've always considered that, up until fairly recently, a perfectly viable solution to these problems. But I've been challenged by members of Critical Resistance in Oakland on this particular issue. And I accept this as a critique. I accept it as a critique of the way I've been thinking and the way that the TGI Justice Project can and should create solutions.

We do work with prisoners who are also coming from that same place. When we ask them -- what kind of solutions do you want to see? -- firing cops is a big part of that. Fining them. Kicking them completely out, barring them from ever having any similar job in the future -- is also a part of that.

So it's an ongoing conversation. That's all I can say, in terms of -- how do you do this in the space of prison advocacy with prisoners who are driving these goals. We're having ongoing conversations with the prisoners we are working with. It's a process and it takes time.

It should be no surprise to anybody that, when you're surrounded by violence, that you start to think that's the only solution. And for folks who are in prison and who are in communities that are constantly surrounded by violence. That's basically us too. Going into that environment and talking to prisoners about what abolition looks like is the same as me talking to people out here -- about what abolition looks like. Except they are under very restrictive conditions inside prison.

So that you have to take the time, just like you are doing when organizing in any kind of space. You have to take the time to talk to people about it and really clarify where they are coming from emotionally, versus what they want to do . . . not just them. Their training solution is not just for them, but for everybody.

So in looking in that frame, one thing that we had to specifically talk to folks in prison about, and they talked to us about it too -- is needing to compare the experiences of transgender women with non-transgender women. And using the experiences of non-transgender women as a way to regain more sympathy for transgender women.

And I understand why they do that. But I feel sad that that's why they feel that they have to do that. So it's an ongoing conversation with them around that too. It's like -- how do you message what's happening to you right now? How do you describe yourself?

In terms of trying to be more specific about abolition -- like I said, in practice it's really a long-term conversation that requires deep trust-building with people. It means you have to be there for the long term. You can't just show up for a year and say -- hey, let's have a conversation; the campaign is over, goodbye.

No, you've got to be there for a long time. They're there for life; we have to be there for life, basically. And to do advocacy like I described it, in what I said, my comments were -- to really specifically look at solutions that at least, at the minimum do not require additional funding for the prison's budget.

So in terms of health care, one thing that I'm experimenting with now is the idea of -- health care in prisons will never work. Because you're asking a prison, which exists to punish people, to be nice to people and heal them. So they're at cross purposes there. No matter how hard you try -- people are human, so you can't make people do two completely opposite things at once. It doesn't work.

So what about taking that money instead and funding community clinics and forcing prisons to do the transportation? And they'll be -- oh no, I don't want to do that, it's so difficult, we don't have the staff.

That's bullshit, whatever. They have lots of money. So what about funding community clinics? There are problems with this particular model too. We don't have to talk about that now, but the idea of moving the money out of prisons and putting it back into the community -- you can do that really literally with the health care because you can put money into the community hospital that's right next door.

The last thing was -- your question about, who is doing LGBT work with prisoners? There are some people, like my organization -- yes, the TIP[?] committee is also doing it. There's also individual people scattered throughout the country who are doing it. There are also small collectives.

This is what's kind of cool, what's great about this historical moment in this field. Is that there are all these collectives popping up everywhere -- like Lawrence, Kansas. Like, I guess a really big . . . a U.S. penitentiary is there, isn't it?

Audience Member: Yes.

Alexander Lee: Okay, so there's a small collective of people there that are doing great things. There are people in Arcada -- which, if any of you know California is way up in northern California. That's real northern California; very rural areas. Mostly they are young people, mostly they are students, mostly they are working class people.

And I don't know all of them, so they're kind of all underground. And part of my work in going around the country is finding out who these people are and creating a network that's more visible and more able to do things in coalition with other groups. inaudible (sierra vera?) Law Project does it also.

Deborah Small: I'll attempt, without creating a greater security risk for myself than I already have, to answer some of

the questions about the historical moment and what I think might be some new forms of civil disobedience. Let me go to the second part first because for those of you who have been following what's happening in Paris, in France right now -- I think it gives us some idea of what is possible when people come together and decide that they are not going to accept what government is attempting to ram down their throats.

Now, the French government thought that they would either be able to appease the students with a small amount of reform of a really bad law. Or that their energy for resistance would dissipate over time. And what they've seen is just the opposite. And so, my first thing that I would say is that we have to promote as activists, getting people out of the U.S. lens of looking at their lives and what they do.

Because the lens that we have here is so limited. Even our conversation about how we got reform. There's a reason why they keep wanting to elevate Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. Because that represents to them, the least threatening form of civil disobedience. Black people marching, singing, holding hands and saying -- yeah, come on, give us what we want.

But the history that people hear about it rarely ever talks about the people who actually were killed and died, fighting for those rights. The watered-down version of the history of the suffragettes doesn't talk about the women who committed suicide,

who engaged in violent acts in order to elevate and promote women's rights.

But if you think about it, no abolition of anything bad happened without violence. Whether it was the Civil War, whether it was the affirmation of workers' rights, whether it was the affirmation of gay and lesbian rights. And particularly so, in a violent society.

So I recently have been rereading Howard Zinn's[?] book, Nine Fallacies of Civil Disobedience, to have me rethink and reorient myself around these issues. Because we're in a technological age. So now, when I'm thinking about civil disobedience, I'm thinking technologically -- like wow, wouldn't it be great if one of us or we can get a group of people to hack into the computers and take some of the oil company profits and use it to get rid of African debt?

(applause)

As a start? It's like, and I get that I'm too old to be at the vanguard of this. No, really! And so, I see having the opportunity to speak to students and stuff as the chance to maybe plant some seeds, that I'm hoping will germinate and nurture. And that I'll get a chance to see the blossoming in the form of (inaudible) (clout?) of some of this stuff, before I die.

And that brings me to what I wanted to say about the historical moment because there's a word that we don't use in this country that is more appropriate now than it's ever been before. And that word is -- fascism. We have a conversation here that, the only fascist government that ever existed was Nazi Germany, forgetting the fact that Italy and Spain also had fascist governments at the same time.

That this government started out as a fascist government and that our attempts have been to reform American democratic fascism, and I believe that what we've seen over the past two decades is more like the last four decades -- is a concerted, well-planned, well-implemented strategy to undo all of the things that have happened over the last 400 years, that have attempted to dismantle the basis of this country which is, private property, acquisition, brute force and limited civic participation.

There's a new little show that's on HBO that I would recommend you guys watch. It's called "Assume the Position" and it's a comedy but it's interesting because it's an attempt to begin to repair the damage of the way that Americans have been educated to think about history.

And I think, in order to do it and not be overly threatening, it has to have a comedic lens. But I think that that work is an essential part of really getting us to where it

is that we need to get. We have to completely reframe the way that we talk about these issues.

And we have to get out of the notion that the only responses to government violence is -- passive non-violence.

(applause)

Kai Barrow: I'm going to stand far away from you. I'm going to sit over here. I want to also respond to that, Deborah. I think also that, how we look at this historical moment is also going to take into consideration some of the resources that we have.

We have more, particularly people of color -- black folks, in particular -- have more access to resources than we've ever had in our history, at a younger age. People have money. Additionally, we have access to information and we have access to networks internationally that we don't tap into unless it's about selling something.

And I think, utilizing our resources in a really broad way is a form of direct action, is a tool that we can use to instill different direct actions. I also think that the mechanisms -- you talked about the evolution of abolitionist politics.

I think also, it's a really important time right now to look at how we organize. And I think one of the things that killed it, in the '60s and the '70s, is that we organized from a very limited, we weren't challenging our power dynamics. We

weren't challenging our internal power -- whether that was around heterosexism, whether that was around patriarchy, misogyny, racism, class.

We weren't challenging those power dynamics in our work. And at the same time, we weren't presenting alternatives to those power dynamics. And when we did say -- this is bothering me -- we weren't offering, collectively we weren't engaged in this struggle to shape new ways to organize and talk to each other.

You talked about community. What is community? We looked at community very, very broadly. It could be neighborhood, it could be a community based on interest and values. We were looking at community, we were looking at people who have shared history, shared investment in the past, present and the future of that particular group or place, who experience similar forms of oppression; and therefore can also experience similar forms of resistance, can engage in similar forms of resistance to that oppression. So we haven't defined community specifically around the idea of geographical area, but more so around who are our people? Where are my people at?

And I think that that's integral to doing any kind of organized actions . . .

(Pause in Taping)

