

Cultivating Solidarity from the Inside-Out

Abolitionist Efforts to Trans-gress the Prison Walls

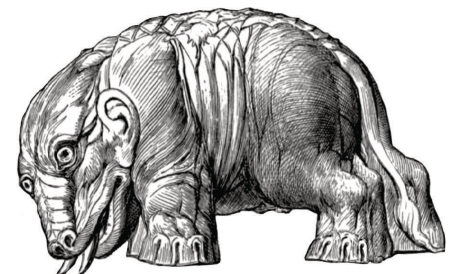
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Abstract

Incarcerated radical intellectuals elucidate the nature of political struggle and its various arenas. Alongside these writers are solidarity groups that propagate their writings and intellectual products. Through a close reading of Black Communist trans prisoner Alyssa V. Hope's legal efforts and writings, this article unearths how a pen-pal relationship transformed into a comprehensive abolitionist community. This case study provides an example of how abolitionists are grappling with the need to support the material needs of marginalised communities while still building otherwise possible worlds separate from a failing welfare state. Mutual aid projects, like the one formed by Hope's supporters, showcase that otherwise possible worlds are not only possible, but they are being created right now before us.

Keywords: Prison Industrial Complex
Abolition, Solidarity, Mutual Aid, Inside-Out Organizing

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Prison writers set the political and social consciousness of leftist movements. The smuggled writings of imprisoned radical intellectuals (Rodriguez 2006) across prison boundaries can articulate the zeitgeist of socio-political movements by locating additional battlegrounds for organizing. Notable authors such as Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1947), North American radical philosopher George Jackson (1970), and Ugandan poet Stella Nyanzi (2020), exist in a long lineage of writers that have challenged dominant regimes and articulated the necessity of otherwise possible worlds (McKittrick 2006). Radical prison writers, like Gramsci, Jackson, and Nyanzi, give a unique, grounded perspective of the material conditions that structure not only the prison but society as a whole. Working alongside prison writers have always been the brave individuals that have disseminated their writings in the free world. In the United States, another writer is emerging within this radical legacy—Black Trans Communist and prison lawyer, Alyssa V. Hope. This essay focuses on the writings of Hope and the coordinated solidarity efforts her writings have inspired. Using the pen as her weapon, Hope’s writings expand the bounds of prison abolitionist organizing by advocating for the concerns of incarcerated Black trans women and amplifying these concerns through solidarity ties to the free world.

Prison industrial complex abolition (PIC abolition) challenges the replication of violence and the roots of violence itself. The PIC is global in reach. Its tentacles touch every aspect of human and non-human life from our schooling to our homes and jobs, and even the soil and air. Starting from the site of the prison, PIC abolition interrogates state and state-sponsored violence within carceral institutions like prisons and jails, practices such as expulsion and captivity commonly used in education systems, and economic belief systems that structure Western society (Foucault 1977). I use this term over other terms like penal abolition or prison abolition to emphasize the large-scale nature of carcerality and the size of solutions needed to combat it. More than the tearing down of jails and prisons (though that is certainly part of an abolitionist project), PIC abolition is about community building and resource sharing amidst organised abandonment from the state in the form of loose welfare nets, lackluster healthcare, and disposability of marginalised populations (Gilmore 1999, 180). Abolitionists, then, counteract the isolation and criminalization embedded within the carceral state by creating bonds of solidarity between prisoners and the outside world. As abolitionist organiser and theorist Mariame Kaba writes, “The work of abolition insists that we foreground the people who are behind the walls... That we transform the relationships we have with each other so that we can really create new forms of safety and justice in our communities.” (Duda/Kaba 2017) This solidarity takes many forms such as written correspondence via pen-pal programs, like that of Britain’s Bent Bars Project, which shows relationships between LGBTQ+ prisoners and supporters on the outside. Abolitionist programs like Bent Bars resolve to cultivate the kinds of relationships between prisoners and ‘free’ people that meet the needs of communities (Lamble 2011, 252). While prisons, jails, and disciplinary institutions like public schools use punishment and coercion to control populations (Morris 2016), abolitionists counter these fear tactics with community care and support that emphasises the plight of incarcerated people.

More than a one-way exchange of sympathy, abolitionist solidarity operationalises mutual aid as a foundational modality for community building. Abolitionist mutual aid recognises the necessity of meeting immediate communal needs while also addressing deeper causes of violence: mechanisms of control, management, and punishment that structure everyday life (Spade 2020, 9). Historically, mutual aid communities have taken many forms including the 1969 Free Breakfast programs of the Black Panther Party in the United States and the maroon communities formed by free and escaped enslaved people (Nelson 2011). In the 1950s and 1960s, health providers routinely refused Black patients and relegated Black people to sub-standard facilities (ibid., 24). To protest this treatment and provide for their community, the Black Panther Party of Oakland and other chapters around the nation and world opened People's Free Medical Clinics that provided quality medical services free of charge to Black community members (ibid., 79). Mutual aid work, like that of the Black Panther Party, is not top-down charity. Rather, mutual aid projects "are an integrated part of our lives... and [they] cultivate a shared analysis of the root causes of the problem." (Spade 2020, 28f.) Even as the welfare state continues to crumble, communities work together to meet each other's needs while creating new relations of accountability and care in the state's absence. During the Covid-19 pandemic, mutual aid groups around the world have emerged to provide financial, health-related, and material assistance for struggling communities. As local and national governments have failed to provide substantial resources for families struggling with unemployment, astronomical healthcare costs, and lack of access to stable housing, material aid operations like that established by the Karda House in Berlin helped to match providers of assistance with those in need of groceries, financial aid, and human connection (Trott 2020, 91). Mutual aid cooperatives embody the understanding that we already have the tools we need to survive even when the state fails us. Sometimes, these tools are virtual. This is the story of how an almost entirely online community emerged to support and enrich the life of Black trans prisoner writer, Alyssa V. Hope. In the next section, we will get to know Hope and her writings. The following section explores how a support committee for Hope emerged outside the prison walls and how they have mobilised to meet Hope's needs inside prison. Lastly, the conclusion analyses the role of mutual aid in building international bonds of solidarity that transcend struggle and geographical bounds.

The Advocacy of Alyssa V. Hope

Incarcerated for more than ten years in a 'hyper-tech' maximum security men's prison, Hope has filed numerous legal petitions on her own behalf in order to garner access to basic resources. Like many trans prisoners, Hope is often segregated from the prison community via solitary confinement and the outside world because of restricted mail privileges (Corcione 2020).[1] Hope legally changed her name to better fit her gender identity in 2018, and yet, her court filings can only be found using her birth name. Hope has filed suit multiple times against prison medical staff for refusal to treat ongoing medical issues caused by her time in prison. According to Jones v. Joubert

[1] Transgender prisoners are often put into administrative segregation (also known as solitary confinement) to prevent violence that might be done to them by their fellow prisoners. Additionally, trans prisoners can often be punished within the prison for having gender-related items that do not match how the prison has categorized them; these items (makeup, chest binding materials, etc.) can be considered contraband by prison officials. For more information on this please consult the 2015 report: "Coming Out of Concrete Closets" by LGBTQ+ prisoner rights organization, Black & Pink.

(2017), Hope alleges prison staff at North Branch Correctional Institution ignored her chronic pain, only prescribing Ibuprofen to treat it. Though this lawsuit and subsequent ones to gain access to hormone treatments were initially unsuccessful, Hope has continued to advocate for herself as a jailhouse lawyer. She has even won access to hormone therapy as a result.

Alongside her work as a jailhouse lawyer, Hope utilises public writing to galvanise support for the larger PIC abolition movement. In a special edition of *Dazed Magazine*, organised and edited by Chelsea Manning, Hope writes about the lasting consequences of the 1971 Attica Uprising in New York.^[2] Hope writes that Attica prisoners were maimed and murdered to “show America [and the world] why prisons were needed, and why the [state] would need additional funding to build more secure prisons...” (Hope 2019). After Attica, specialised prisons, much like the high-tech maximum-security prison in which Hope is currently incarcerated, became a ‘solution’ to prisoner control. More than a critique of the escalating nature of the carceral state, Hope’s work is that of a domestic geographer (Vasudevan/Smith 2020). Drawing on feminist and Black geographical traditions, Vasudevan and Smith’s conception of a domestic geographical sphere is useful in articulating how Hope utilizes the confined and intimate space of the prison cell alongside the larger, yet still confined space of the United States, to cultivate a politics of struggle against the PIC (*ibid.*, 3). Hope’s development of an internationalist minded, anti-imperialist politics while inside the prison places her in a much larger lineage of Black political struggle known as the Black Radical Tradition (Robinson 1983). The prison, though fixed as a location of state and state sponsored enslavement, has always also facilitated this type of counter-hegemonic resistance through a relationship Garrett Felber refers to as the dialectics of discipline (2020). In the case of Attica, the legacy of the rebellion lives inside of the current iteration of abolitionist politics around the world. As Hope states, it is our job now to “not let our elders [from the Attica Rebellion] die in vain.” (2019) Hope’s insistence on the importance of Attica to a broader abolitionist fight counteracts the liberal impulse to believe PIC abolition is a recent invention by the North American academy (James 2021). Moreover, Hope’s provocation to remember Attica is a cry for historiographical expansiveness that remembers, recovers, and regenerates the struggles of the past within the current moment. The abolition movement of today builds on the sacrifices of those before us, whose critiques of the PIC were met with unspeakable violence. Hope’s writing contextualises the long lineage of PIC abolition work from Attica to today.

The Solidarity Movement Behind Hope

What started as a pen-pal relationship between Hope and socialist organiser/writer, Adryan Corcione, has transformed into a digital lifeline for Hope. In 2017, Corcione and Hope became connected by Black & Pink, an abolitionist queer organization which is headquartered in Nebraska. Collaborating with Hope via phone call, physical letter, and electronic mail, Corcione coordinated an online platform for Hope through the Twitter profile @comradealyssa. This profile tweets opportunities to advocate for Hope and other Black trans incarcerated people. When prison officials refused to acknowledge Hope’s name change, the @comradealyssa community mobilised to re-

^[2] Considered one of the bloodiest prison rebellions in the world, the Attica Prison Rebellion of 1971 occurred two weeks after the murder of revolutionary George Jackson and resulted in the death of more than 40 people. A group of majority Black prisoners took several hostages and released a list of 27 demands, including the creation of basic sanitation practices, visiting rights, and an end to racist treatment and brutalization by prison staff. After four days of failed negotiation, Governor Rockefeller ordered the State Police to quell the rebellion, and thus, military, police, and prison guards dropped tear gas into the prison and opened fire. In 2000, New York settled with the families of prisoners killed at Attica for \$8 million.

peatedly call the prison to demand the recognition of Hope's name change (Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, 2018). Moreover, this community solicits pecuniary resources that fund Hope's legal efforts, help Hope purchase books, and gender transition supplies. Through the Comrade Alyssa Support Committee's individual social media as well as the @comradealyssa account, Corcione and their comrades amplify Hope's story to socialist and abolitionist organizations around the world, including the UK branch of the Incarcerated Workers Organising Committee. As a result of the Support Committee's organizing, Hope has often lost privileges to phone and letter access. This is the state's attempt to starve out the resources Hope has amassed on the outside while also sending a message to Hope and other radical prisoners that their political activities will not be tolerated. In response, Hope's Support Committee has continued organizing for her rights inside, and when they are allowed contact with her, they spread her writings, condition, and needs to transnational networks of support. When they are denied access, the Support Committee uplifts stories of other Black radical prisoners, like Strawberry Hampton, a trans woman, who has been kept in solitary confinement for several months after she sued the Illinois Department of Corrections for being held in men's prisons (Corcione 2020). The Comrade Alyssa Support Committee resists the state's attempt to isolate Hope by spreading her writings and uplifting the struggles of other radical prisoners.

Alongside supporting Hope's immediate needs, Hope's support committee also facilitates the publication of her writing. The committee posts Hope's writings from prison to an online subscription platform with the proceeds going to support Hope's ongoing material needs. In an "Essay to the LGBTQIA Community from August 2020", Hope writes of the need for mutual aid. She asserts, "We are all we got in this life. If we don't love each other, then who will love us?" (2020). Hope understands that the same state that incarcerates and kills cannot fulfil the needs of communities. She continues, "We, as a community, have to unite and begin to build a foundation of trust and begin to assist our people in all areas of our life." (2020) Here, Hope's writing, perhaps inadvertently, comments on the nature of her own support community. When the state left Hope vulnerable to abuse and violence, Hope's own support committee formed to meet her needs and to disseminate Hope's polemics to broader society.

Community support groups like Hope's have broad implications for the creation of otherwise possible worlds. Hope and the @comradealyssa community are theorizing and actively building a new world apart from a punishment regime. As PIC abolition becomes a more widely disseminated idea, some question whether the vision is too broad, too theoretical, and even possible. Through the mobilization and organization of solidarity groups like Hope's, Bent Bars, and Black & Pink, PIC abolition emerges not as a thought exercise, but as a phenomenon that is already unfolding before us. Abolition requires mutual aid work between those who may disagree on tactics and strategy but maintain a shared value in the dignity of all living things (Lee 2008, 112). A mutual aid framework can help alleviate the strain of ideological and political debates by recognizing regardless of whether one particularly lives by an abolitionist position, socialists, anarchists, communists, and other radical sects can find utility in creating and maintaining community formations to solve systemic problems. Ideological and political contradic-

tions necessarily remain, but mutual aid connects disparate struggles to the larger project of abolition. In this regard, “freedom is a place”, a geographical creation that involves the destruction of harmful systems and practices and the creation of mutually constituted community formations embedded in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore theorizes as abolition geographies (2017, 227). By joining LGBTQ+ movement with the movement against incarceration and the Movement for Black Lives, Hope’s support committee showcases the nature of abolition as a multi-faceted fight for life. This fight as Gilmore reminds us, requires that we change one thing: everything.

Only We Can Save Us

Prison writers and their comrades on the outside transform the conditions for organizing and the political terrains encompassed within the ‘possible’ paradigm. Imprisoned radical intellectuals, like Hope, embody a praxis that “entails the invention of new communicative modalities and strategies, from the production of new political vernaculars to the construction of subversive pedagogical spaces and networks.” (Rodriguez 2006, 73) These intellectuals continue to imagine and cultivate caring communities, despite uncertainty of whether these futuristic models will ever take shape widely. Prescription and status quo are antithetical to an abolitionist project, and imprisoned radical intellectuals know this. Canadian scholar Robyn Maynard affirms that “we must refuse to surrender our imaginations”, and confront the refusal-creation dialectic which abolition requires (2017, 249). The refusal of the prison system (and its posterity) must always be accompanied by the creative forces needed to imagine sustainable worlds, where prisons and isolationism become unthinkable. In the case of Hope, her committee raises money for commissary and legal fees through a subscription service that gives individuals access to Hope’s writing. This helps provide for her immediate needs while the Committee works towards longer term journey of building abolition.

Collective political struggle, inspired by historical continuities and mistakes of past actors, is the only way to transform a carceral society into a safe one. This process is transnational and across varied political struggles. The Free Angela Davis (And All Political Prisoners) Campaign stands as an example for solidarity campaigns like the Comrade Alyssa Support Committee. Facing murder charges after a courthouse shootout involving her comrade Jonathan Jackson, the committee created to save Davis’ life garnered international support from European freedom fighters and beyond. Historical examples like the Free Angela Committee animate contemporary struggles like that of the Comrade Alyssa Support Committee, which utilizes the story of one individual to connect broader struggles against global imperialism through social media awareness campaigns and phone zaps (Rosenberg 2020). From the Free Angela Committee to the @comradealyssa committee, solidarity has been a worldwide practice of community building, resource sharing, and mobilization to support one another. From Hope’s theoretical writing to the group-centered leadership function of the committee, solidarity and collective well-being are at the centre of every part of the group’s work. Other social movements can benefit from the horizontal and decentralized approaches modelled by the @comradealyssa committee. Social media,

just like flyers and long-form essays, are a tool that can be used effectively in the building of more equal communities. Abolitionist formations, like Hope's, preserve the intellectual archives of prison writers all the while demonstrating that the only way to cultivate livable lives is through collective struggle.

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