

VIDEO: Tay's story (I)

I began participating in collective work to materially support incarcerated people in 2020—which is to say, not long ago at all, considering the fact that many people have done this their whole lives. Sometimes people call this work mutual aid. Sometimes people call it support work. Sometimes people don't give a name to this part of the fabric of their lives.

Regardless of the name or lack thereof, support across walls as I know it looks like being in committed and loving relationship with people, respecting the autonomy that prisons strip away, and fulfilling the material needs that prisons deliberately deny.

Sometimes it looks like agitating against specific harms, like withheld medication or solitary confinement. Sometimes it looks like making one another playlists and art. **This array of loving and sometimes militant acts, exchanged between people inside and people outside, is the concern of my oral history project.**

Some of these audio clips contain descriptions of interpersonal and state violence. They are marked with asterisks—not so as to be avoided but to be moved into with awareness. These narratives all belong to people I care for. They are short (less than 4 minutes), and to be listened to as you can. I hope that you do.

AUDIO: CRYSTAL'S STORY

Crystal talks about the life circumstances and abusive relationship that culminated in her imprisonment at Bedford Hills, and the bonds that systemic violence could not break: with her children, and with her dear friend Vincent.

The mutual aid society survived the Middle Passage and ... was remade in the hold of the slave ship, the plantation, and the ghetto. It made good the ideals of the commons, the collective, the ensemble, the always-more-than-one of existing in the world. The mutual aid society was a resource of black survival.

-Saidiya Hartman

AGAINST ABANDONMENT

Support work does not exist without relationships. For those people like me who are not system-impacted, or not already kin with people inside, it almost always begin with writing to someone.

The Prisoner Correspondence Project notes that many incarcerated people consider isolation “the most debilitating part of a prison sentence.” This isolation serves multiple purposes: it is a form of domination, control, and dehumanization, and it keeps prisons’ everyday atrocities out of sight and out of mind for the outside world.

Penpal relationships help to break this isolation, and to disrupt the violence that is reliant thereupon. As Survived & Punished organizers write in their guide to letter-writing, “We hear often that just receiving letters signals to guards that the person has a support network, one that might respond if any violence or harassment should occur.”

As importantly, when we are in relationship with one another, we learn each other’s needs and desires, and we begin to learn to fulfill them. Building and maintaining relationships are an essential entry point to taking on prisons as the total institutions they are.

AUDIO: TAY’S STORY (II)

Tay talks about the violence of Western Illinois Correctional Center.

Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.

—Angela Davis

AUDIO: MINALI AND CAREN’S STORY

Minali and Caren talk about visiting Rocko in prison during the pandemic and the brutality that they became proximate to as visitors. Prison is a border, as abolitionist feminist Gina Dent notes, and visits are strenuously policed. The conversation transitions to the death-making regulation of masking in prisons.

LOVE IS A BUSTLING HIGHWAY // WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

AUDIO: CAREN'S STORY

Caren tells a rousing anecdote about supporting their friend J. (abbreviated from Joker), abolitionist care work, and modeling loving modes of relation.

In a letter from prison, trans woman Cece McDonald wrote, “Society says that love is one way and very black and white, but we all know that love is a bustling highway and bursting with all vivid colors.” She is talking of queer and trans love, to be sure—“They tell us who we can and can’t love, how we should love them, and why”—but she is also talking about the boundary- and border-crossing love of her friends and supporters. “I love you all because you all invested in me what I could not have done on my own,” she writes. “Your own time, dedication, and emotions. And wherever it may have come from, it has given me the motivation and inspiration to fight for all of us.”

Love is a bustling highway: it moves us toward abolitionist practices that confront the prison-industrial complex in multiple, ingenious, new, and old ways. It propels us toward a different geography: tactile, open, intimate, and multi-directional.

Feminist organizers and survivors have worked for decades to demonstrate that love and care are and must be central to organizing work—so successfully that it has become something of a cliché to speak of them. Abolition is not, after all, about feelings alone, as Mariame Kaba and Rachel Herzing warn us in a different context. I also have a hunch that this discourse has proliferated in the university because it is easy for some people to think about an abolition that doesn’t involve destroying this world, but rather just being really nice to one another. In a recent article, Lee Shevek warns us against a liberal abolitionism: a singular focus on cute and palliative care is surely one part of this always-encroaching liberalism. Indeed, I do not intend to suggest that all we need to do to address the death-making violence of prisons is proliferate penpal networks—that if everyone had a penpal, everything would be all right.

AUDIO: LAWRENCE'S SPEECH

Political prisoner Lawrence Jenkins talks about the insufficiency of correspondence and mutual aid in dismantling the prison-industrial complex. This clip is part of a speech recorded for a recent event, “Abolition: Where Do We Go From Here?” with Robin D.G. Kelly, Derecka Purnell, and Garrett Felber, moderated by Elizabeth Hinton.

The reality is that realizing the totality of what care and love can mean is not easy. I don’t know what it looks like to put abolition and revolution together, after Joy James, and revolution and love together, after Che Guevara. But my friends tell me it will involve being creative and relentless.

EPILOGUE

AUDIO: TAY'S STORY (III)

Tay and I talk about love.