

**YOU MAY START THE CONVERSATION NOW:
TWO EXERCISES IN COLLABORATION TOWARDS ABOLITION**

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ABSTRACT

You May Start the Conversation Now: Two Exercises in Collaboration Towards Abolition is a portfolio of two screen-based collaborations between Kriss Li and Amber Kim, a prisoner in Washington State. The first piece, *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* is a multi-media installation composed of a two-channel silent video, five flipbooks based on the video, and a publication of conversations between Kriss and Amber. The piece emerged out of a six-month reading group. The second project, *You May Start the Conversation Now*, is a twenty-minute short film that documents a day of rehearsals with two actors performing science fiction dialogues co-written by Amber and Kriss through a game of exquisite corpse. This support paper will examine the obstacles, frictions, and possibilities for solidarity in artistic co-creations between people inside and outside prison, examined within the context of a broader movement to abolish prisons.

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INTRODUCTION

This support paper will examine the obstacles, frictions, and possibilities for solidarity in artistic co-creations between people inside and outside prison, examined within the context of a broader movement to abolish prisons. These dynamics will be explored through my first-hand experience working closely on two video projects with Amber Kim, a prisoner in Washington State.

Amber and I are the same age, born about a week apart in 1988. Amber has been in prison since she was eighteen, the same age that I would enter university in Montreal. A few years later, when I was twenty-one, I joined the organizing collective of Prisoner Correspondence Project (PCP), a pen pal program and resource library that connected LGBTQ prisoners with the broader queer and trans community on the outside. Amber and I got to know each other about a decade into my time with PCP, when she started sending contributions to our newsletter, *The Word is Out*. She soon became a valuable member of PCP's inside collective, a group of prisoners that reads and offers feedback on the outside collective's monthly meeting minutes. She later became the resident *The Word is Out* advice columnist, providing thoughtful counsel to other PCP inside members on the emotional challenges they were facing. This is how Amber describes herself:

Amber Kim is an activist, witch, nerd, trans woman and author who believes in comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable. When she's not madly pounding away at her typewriter, she can be found curled up with a good book, chill music, and crunchy snacks. She is currently serving life without parole in Washington State. To learn more about Amber check out AmberFayefoxKim.wordpress.com (Amber Kim, electronic message to author, electronic message to author, December 15, 2020)

My first in-depth collaboration with Amber is *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* (2022-2024). For this project, Amber and I engaged in a six-month reading group by phone and on a for-profit online communication system for prisoners formerly known as Jpay, now called Securus. Based on our

readings and discussions, we collaboratively conceptualized a script that I used to produce a two-channel short silent video installation. During an artist residency at the Paper Machine printshop in New Orleans, I received support from the staff to turn the film into a series of flipbooks to mail into prison. The short films, flipbooks, and a publication of excerpts from written and phone correspondences between Amber and me formed a multimedia installation at Dazibao Contemporary Art Centre in fall 2024. The exhibition was accompanied by a presentation from me that documents the process behind this project as well as a previous edition of *Abolition Film Society*, where I shared a program of short experimental films with incarcerated people within the limitations of the prison system.

The second collaboration between Amber and me, *You May Start the Conversation Now* (2025), emerged from an artist residency organized by ArtEngine in Ottawa, which selected eight artists to co-create an imaginary futurist world within a workshop moderated by science fiction writer Suyi Davies Okungbowa. After the workshop, each artist created independent work based on the collectively designed world. For the residency, I produced a video around a series of dialogues written by Amber and me through a game of exquisite corpse: Amber initiated writing a fictionalized conversation taking place in the collectively built world, then sent me the last couple phrases from her written dialogue (the “tail”); I continued writing new dialogue based on the tail then sent the last phrases of my writing to Amber, who continued writing the script using incomplete information, and so on. The film submitted in my thesis portfolio, which is a re-edited version of the video installation shown at the residency, documents a day of rehearsals with two actors performing these serially co-written science fiction dialogues. In the film, fragmented rehearsal footage is punctuated with recordings of phone conversations between Amber and me during the writing process.

The research process for both films, as in much of my other work, drew heavily from texts and debates on political change, a topic that I spend a lot of time thinking about. While I watched films for personal enjoyment during this time, I did not methodically consult other films in the development process. The aesthetic direction for these projects emerged intuitively and materialized based on the

resources that I had available. Accordingly, the main influences included in my paper are not cinematic references but rather works in political theory and analysis.

Abolitionist Solidarities

My involvement with prisoner solidarity began when I became a collective member of Prisoner Correspondence Project in 2009. Founded in 2007 by a group of queers in Montréal then in their early 20s, PCP continues to operate to this day. The project supports over 4000 LGBTQ prisoners across Canada and the United States through a pen pal program, a library of over 200 free resources on topics like safer sex and mental health, and *The Word is Out*, a newsletter with themed submissions from prisoners. Though PCP is located in Canada, its membership from the start has included people confined inside U.S. prisons – the program was inaugurated after the founding member received and started responding to a handful of letters from an overworked queer and trans prisoner pen pal program in North Carolina. Today, disparity in the size of the long-term prisoner population in the U.S. and Canada means that over 99% of PCP’s inside membership is located in the U.S. Accordingly, my ensuing discussion of the prison system will focus on the U.S.

PCP is organized by an outside collective of six to ten volunteers and an inside collective of around fifteen prisoners who read and respond to monthly meeting minutes, offer guidance on the direction of the outside collective, choose a theme for each newsletter’s call for submissions, and participate in special projects like one-off publications occasionally produced by PCP. In my time as a PCP collective member, I’ve helped coordinate the collective’s day-to-day operations in moments of high involvement and, in moments of lower capacity, focused on managing the newsletter.

From the beginning, PCP held a commitment to principles of prison abolition. In popular imagination, harm and violence within a society are attributed to the actions of a few pathological individuals. In this view, social problems could be resolved by separating those bad people from everyone else and keeping them locked away. Abolitionist organizers dispute this individualist understanding,

emphasizing ongoing conditions of poverty, abuse, addiction, and untreated mental illnesses that many prisoners experience prior to their conviction. These conditions are unevenly experienced by poor and racialized people. For abolitionists, locking up people in states of deprivation, without addressing larger racialized and class structures of violence that condition harmful individual behavior, is ineffectual at eliminating societal harm.

The failure of prisons to address social harm is underscored by geographer and abolitionist organizer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag*, a seminal study on the explosive growth of the California prison system at the end of the twentieth century. Gilmore notes that during the 1980s and 1990s, a period when many states constructed a large number of new prisons, adopted harsher sentencing, and drastically increased their incarcerated population, crime rates did in fact decline across the U.S. However, this apparent correlation between an extended carceral system and lower crime rates is challenged by comparative analysis. Gilmore finds that, compared to less punitive states, jurisdictions that undertook a prison boom actually experienced *lower* decreases in crime. Similarly, California counties that aggressively pursued tougher sentencing laws experienced less crime reduction than counties that used those laws sparingly. On a neighbourhood level, Gilmore notes that "identical locations — in terms of the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of inhabitants — diverge over time into different qualities of place when one of them experiences high rates of imprisonment of residents," where high incarceration rate is connected to "greater *instability*." (Gilmore 2007, 16, her emphasis)

Thus, although policymakers often evoke public safety and reducing crimes as reasons to build more prisons, the arrival of additional prisons in many U.S. states at the end of the twentieth century did not generate more safety or less crime. The places that most enthusiastically embraced prisons as the catch-all solution for social problems were less successful at addressing those very problems than jurisdictions where fewer new prisons were built. This insight is important to the abolitionist idea that isolating individuals from society and locking them in prisons is not an effective means of creating collective safety. Beyond *failing to reduce* social problems, prisons are seen by abolitionists as *active*

sources of harm. The most obvious form of harm caused by prisons is the daily conditions of these institutions, which are often called horrific, cruel, and dehumanizing. Countless reports from human rights organizations, news media, government audits, and first-person accounts attest to the high level of violence and deprivation inside prisons in both the U.S. and Canada. These reports document shocking incidents of physical and sexual abuse that prisoners experience from guards and other inmates, routine administrative neglect, food insecurity, overcrowding, inadequate access to mental and physical healthcare, lack of work or educational opportunities, extensive use of lockdowns where prisoners are kept in their cells for days at a time, and long-term solitary confinement, where individuals are locked alone in a cell for months and sometimes decades.

The damaging effects of incarceration often last beyond people's sentences. The traumatic conditions on the inside can induce or exacerbate mental illnesses that follow people long after they are released. Formerly incarcerated people also face significant barriers in the labour market. In 2018, formerly incarcerated people in the U.S. were unemployed at a rate of 27%, nearly five times the unemployment rate of the general population. Studies show that a criminal record led to a 50% reduction of job application callbacks. (Couloute and Kopf 2018) Further, without access to steady employment, many former prisoners face challenges in securing stable housing.

Beyond these immediate repercussions on people who have spent time inside prisons, the prison system also takes significant toll on the larger communities surrounding incarcerated people. In the U.S., a great distance exists between where most incarcerated people are from and where they are held. The majority of prisoners are drawn from impoverished and racialized urban neighbourhoods while most prisons, especially those built during the 1980s and 1990s incarceration boom, are situated in rural areas. This geographic configuration impedes the ability for families to maintain connection, which is further strained by the expense of phone calls and other forms of contact. As Gilmore writes, "households stretch from neighborhood to visiting room to courtroom, with a consequent thinning of financial and emotional resources." (Gilmore 2007, 16)

Guided by thinkers like Gilmore, PCP supports the abolition of prisons, defined by Critical Resistance to be “a *political vision* with the *goal* of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and *creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment*.” (Critical Resistance 2025, their emphasis) This abolitionist orientation sets PCP apart from many other service providers for prisoners, which are often driven by humanitarian concerns to ease the harshest impacts of incarceration while accepting the inevitability of locking up some people as a necessary cost of public safety. PCP, on the other hand, situates our work of creating connections between inside and outside within a broader goal of undermining the core function of prisons to isolate the people they confine from the rest of society. Operating with the position that isolation is not an effective response to harm, PCP extends inside membership to prisoners regardless of their conviction, including people charged with violent offenses, and guides outside pen pals to reframe their understanding of harm through structural, rather than individual, lenses. This practice aims to weaken the imaginative link between incarceration and collective safety.

From Abolitionist Solidarities to Abolitionist Politics

In the sixteen years since I first joined PCP, I have seen a drastic shift in popular perception of the American prison system. While the proposal to abolish, rather than merely reform, prisons has circulated in activist settings for decades, especially after the 2003 publication of Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, I witnessed the generalized proliferation of critiques of the prison system in the 2010s, when advocates as unlikely as Kim Kardashian began to denounce prisons as sites of injustice. (Jacobs 2024) In the midst of mass uprisings against racist police violence in the summer of 2020, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder by a white officer from the Minneapolis Police Department, the concept of “prison abolition” received mainstream attention, with *The New York Times* publishing a profile of Ruth Wilson Gilmore written by Rachel Kushner under the title “Is Prison Necessary?”

In this time, I have also witnessed the abolitionist movement grow and sharpen its focus. When I first joined PCP, many organizations like PCP primarily expressed our abolitionist commitment as principled denouncements against the injustices of the prison system while supporting individual prisoners through pen pal and books-to-prisoners programs. Many of us lacked a detailed understanding of the power structures that maintain the prison system in different locales and a theory of change for the large-scale political transformation necessary to create a socio-economic structure that would no longer rely on incarceration to address social problems. Then, at some point in the last decade, a pragmatic abolitionist program developed and flourished across organizing contexts. Abolitionist politics converged into the campaign to divest public funds from punitive institutions like prisons and the police towards life affirming systems of support like housing, education, healthcare, and good jobs for all — what one Canadian abolitionist coalition, founded in 2020, calls “real safety.” (Choosing Real Safety 2025)

Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s work is foundational to this shift in organizing focus. My own approach towards abolitionist politics is deeply influenced by her, as repeated references to her work in this paper attest. A co-founder of California Prison Moratorium Project, which successfully campaigned to halt the construction of new state prisons in California, Gilmore’s analysis contains a level of clarity and usefulness towards organizing that is lacking in many progressive discussions about the harms of incarceration. Gilmore is careful to avoid characterizations that appeal to emotional satisfaction over precise understanding of the prison system’s concrete dynamics, and she is attentive to the implications for organizing brought on by distorted understandings. She is critical, for instance, of a popular explanation of twentieth century carceral expansion that focuses on the racially biased war on drugs, advanced by books like Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and Ava DuVernay’s Netflix-distributed film *13th*. This link between mass incarceration and drug policy overlooks the reality that the vast majority of people inside the U.S. prison system are convicted of crimes categorized as violent offenses — meaning that devoting organizing energy towards changing drug policy and legislative

practices affecting “relatively innocent” prisoners, like those with wrongful convictions, would accomplish little to reduce the scope of the U.S. prison system. (Sawyer and Wagner 2025)

Another common rhetoric that Gilmore cautions against is the misconception that U.S. prisons are majority Black. Kushner’s *The New York Times* profile of Gilmore expands on this:

Not only is it a false and harmful stereotype to overassociate black people with prison, she argues, but by not acknowledging racial demographics and how they shift from one state to another, and over time, the scope and crisis of mass incarceration can’t be fully comprehended. In terms of racial demographics, black people are the population most affected by mass incarceration — roughly 33 percent of those in prison are black, while only 12 percent of the United States population is — but Latinos still make up 23 percent of the prison population and white people 30 percent, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. (Gilmore has heard people argue that drug laws will change because the opioid epidemic hurts rural whites, a myth that drives her crazy. “People say, ‘God knows they’re not going to lock up white people,’” she told me, “and it’s like, Yes, they *do* lock up white people.”) (Kushner 2019)

In contrast to the reductively racialized explanation for who is targeted by the prison system (in some abolitionist circles it has become routine to answer this with “Black and brown people”), Gilmore’s offers an alternative carceral demography: “When I describe who is in prison, the phrase that I always use is ‘modestly educated women and men in the prime of their lives.’” (Gilmore 2022, 459) This phrase guides Gilmore to a series of investigations about conditions that shift across different points in time and space:

How do women and men *become* modestly educated? How is it that people in the prime of their lives who otherwise would be making, moving, growing, and caring for things instead are in cages? What has happened to the making, moving, growing, and caring for things that has changed through the participation of modestly educated women and men in those economic sectors? What did the activities and organizing of such folks become in capitalist terms? (And that’s not always the same everywhere.) What is it about the regions that these folks come from

that has changed, since once upon a time, without question, there was always absorption into a certain labor market niche — often, but not always, a low-wage labor force — that is now unquestionably impossible? (Gilmore 2022, 459, her emphasis)

Gilmore phrasing leads to an understanding of the prison system as intertwined with, but not reducible to, racialized oppression:

Now imagine that we're looking at a Los Angeles County graph of race and gender in relation to jobs and employment over time. You will see that as the best-waged jobs for Black men disappeared, the number of Black men going to prison shot up. Then we move across in time a little bit, and we see that as the well-waged jobs for Chicanos start to disappear, the number of Chicanos going to prison shoots up. And every time we see a certain labor market niche shrink, there's a sudden, secular rise — it's not just a spike; it goes up, and it keeps going up — in the number of people from the demographic category going to prison. (Gilmore 2022, 462)

This analysis presents the prison system, and the people entrapped by it, as an evolving set of relations involving state responses to a community's declining access to paid labour that could sustain their lives. This dynamic understanding of an ever-shifting prison system diverges from theories that treat mass incarceration as the latest manifestation of a fixed presence of racial oppression throughout American history, with significant implications for organizing. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's husband and longtime co-organizer, Craig Gilmore, offers insightful commentary on this in an interview:

There are any number of fairly simplistic understandings of why the Prison Industrial Complex exists. None of them are entirely wrong, but in their simplicity, they're misleading. If your explanation for why the Prison Industrial Complex exists is that *this is a racist country*, it's like, *yeah it is a racist country*. But it was a racist country in 1950, it was a racist country in 1900; we didn't lock as many people up. I think understanding why the Prison Industrial Complex exists could be more complex and nuanced. I think understanding how it works, again, could be a lot more detailed such that more of us thought more strategically about where it's vulnerable. If I

gave you a wrench, a big fucking wrench, and say, *disable that car*, you could beat on it for a couple months, and probably disable it. Or if you knew how a car worked, you could disable it in thirty seconds. Now I'm not saying we could disable the PIC in thirty seconds with any wrench, but I feel sometimes like we're beating on it with a wrench, rather than thinking about where it's vulnerable and how we could break it more easily than we do. (Gilmore 2017)

Over the last few years, I have been obsessed with the question of how people working towards liberation could organize more effectively — to move beyond voicing righteous critiques and towards winning transformative material gains through targeted actions and building sufficient political leverage. In this work, I take a lot of guidance from the Gilmores. Though it may not be obvious, this preoccupation with strategy also drives the films in my thesis portfolio. The collaborations that I have undertaken with Amber are not organizing campaigns. As such, they lack the detailed systems analysis that Craig Gilmore considers necessary for capably dismantling a car as well as the prison system. What these collaborative projects have allowed me to do is explore the “wrench”: the relational dynamics between people that enables them towards more effective collective action, and the frictions that threaten to undo those links.

Like most people who have spent significant time in political organizing, I have experienced the erosion of multiple projects of collective resistance from the strain of interpersonal tensions. Among organizers, differences or mistakes that could appear minor to outsiders become loaded with the weight of centuries-long structural oppressions, as personified by the individual behaviour of another member engaged in the same struggle. Unresolved, these conflicts can grow into what Jo Friedman describes, in a 1976 article, as the phenomenon of “trashing” common within the second-wave feminist movement: a form of politicized ostracism that “mak[es] you feel that your very existence is inimical to the Movement and that nothing can change this short of ceasing to exist.” (Freedman 1976)

In *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat*, Hannah Proctor connects these familiar organizational fallouts to the slow pace of political transformation. Proctor cites psychiatrist

Robert Coles's 1964 research on the psychological effects of sustained political organizing on veteran civil rights movement activists:

Coles describes people who entered the movement expecting change to come quickly but who, having engaged in similar actions again and again, had come to feel they had got no closer to victory: 'I thought we'd demonstrate and then they'd fold up before us. But it's been tougher than I ever dreamed.' The enemy began to seem impervious to attack. Resistance appeared increasingly futile and personal risk, particularly the risk of arrest and imprisonment, less worthwhile. Exhausted, an activist might also repudiate or begin to doubt their political commitments and principles, turning their anger away from the oppressive social conditions they had been fighting and onto the movement itself. Interpersonal tensions are another symptom of exhaustion. (Hannah Proctor 2024, chap. 5)

These tensions are even more difficult to navigate when working across large power differences. Some organizers respond to this challenge by restricting the scope of their camaraderie, to organize only with people who occupy similar social positions. However, the intersectional character of oppressions — the way that different social locations overlap and intersect to create unique experiences of oppression — renders the total absence of power differences difficult to achieve within any collective form, and frictions from unaccounted hierarchies threaten to fracture even closely guarded collectives. Further, as Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor notes in her assessment of the Black Lives Matter movement, narrow organizational forms face limitations on the scale of change they are able to enact:

One of the things the best parts of the movement did was demonstrate how the working-class character of Black life was what made Black people vulnerable to policing, and to the overrepresentation of Black people in the criminal legal system. The problem, though, is that a movement focused purely or exclusively on the lives of Black people actually doesn't have the social capacity to transform those conditions that make Black people vulnerable to policing in the first place. If we say that social inequality, economic inequality is at the centre of that

vulnerability, then it actually takes a mass movement to transform that. And a movement that defines itself as Black Lives Matter is not the vehicle that can build the mass, multi-racial movement that is necessary because something has to capture the radicalization of white people and transform that into politics as well. (Taylor 2024)

The collaborations that I have submitted in my thesis are a modest effort to address the immensely difficult, but necessary, task of solidarity across power differences. These projects create a container that allow Amber and me, on two sides of the prison wall, to practice thinking and making together without the pressures of a political campaign. They give me an opportunity to work through disagreements and correct moments of misjudgment without the risk of compromising important political decisions. The process of undergoing these creative and fun exercises is a rehearsal for developing habits that can hopefully strengthen my capacities for solidarity in contexts of higher-stake struggle.

Artistic Collaboration Across Prison Walls

In *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, Nicole Fleetwood writes about the fraught nature of prison art collaborations, especially nonprofit arts programming that operate with the approval of prison administrations. She develops the concept of “fraught imaginaries” as a framework for examining “the complex dynamics and power structures that shape artistic collaborations between nonincarcerated professional artists, nonprofit arts organizations, and incarcerated artists, students, and participants.” (Fleetwood 2020, 158) Fleetwood writes about the virtual disappearance of institutionally run educational and cultural programs within U.S. prisons from the 1980s onward “as politicians, lawmakers and prison administrators created more retributive prison environments.” (Fleetwood 2020, 168) During this time, outside organizations, often connected to nonprofits or universities, have stepped in to provide arts programming inside. These projects are typically funded by sources outside the Department of Corrections, often by philanthropic or government grants. Though they are not institutionally run, they are institutionally embedded. In some instances, the Departments of Corrections

invite community or arts organizations inside to provide services like art classes, workshops, or special projects. Other times, organizations or artists receive funding to implement a preconceived curriculum and seek out a prison that is willing to host the project. In both cases, artistic activities involving prisoners happen with the approval and management of the administration.

The institutionally embedded context for most prison arts initiatives has several consequences. Often, the very access to these programs is determined by the prison. “In many instances,” writes Fleetwood, “prison staff choose the participants, and the selection process can reproduce racial and ethnic hierarchies that exist inside facilities,” leading to cases like one institution where a prison with majority Black inmates had no Black participants selected for art classes. (Fleetwood 2020, 155) Further, the access that nonprofit arts projects have into prisons is dependent on maintaining healthy relationships with the prison administration. Generally, artists and teachers are not permitted to have contact with prisoners outside the sanctioned project; their entire connection to prisoners is within a framework controlled by the administration. Consequently, these projects are structurally more connected and accountable to prison staff than to the prisoners involved in the projects.

My experience with art collaborations with incarcerated people, including the two projects discussed in this paper, unfold under different circumstances. Neither Prisoner Correspondence Project nor my personal projects have ever gone through official channels of the prison system. PCP was founded by responding to a handful of letters from a different grassroots letter-writing initiative, and most prisoners discover the project through informal means, by word of mouth or coming across a newsletter that someone else leaves behind in common spaces. The membership is self-selected rather than determined by the prison administration. This unsanctioned mode of operation means that resources distributed by PCP are subject to ongoing censorship. Requested material from the resource library are regularly returned for violating various regulations according to the discretion of mail room staff. Materials sent from the project have been banned wholesale by specific institutions and, for a period of time, even an entire state. Despite this, PCP is committed to sending requested content that is likely to get

rejected, such as gay smut. Oftentimes, this pays off. Understaffing in most prisons means that bans are inconsistently enforced, and subversive items end up getting through to people who wanted them.

Further, unlike nonprofit organizations, PCP is maintained by unpaid volunteers. The project receives free office space and around \$4000 per year from two student groups on university campuses and fundraises the rest of the \$10,000 - \$20,000 annual costs through donations and benefit events. Unlike grant-funded initiatives, PCP does not need to answer to powerful outside funders.

The relationships in my inside-outside artistic collaborations thus far have all been drawn from the most active people among the PCP membership. This circumvention of official channels allows me to operate in ways that are unconventional in nonprofit arts programming contexts. When I have visited inside collaborators, it was through the same procedure as any other visitor rather than as an identifiable artist. I have paid all my inside collaborators — as much as \$11,600 CAD in one instance when I received an arts council grant, at the same hourly rate as what I paid myself. In jurisdictions like Florida, where incarcerated people are forbidden from receiving payment, I have purchased books and commissary items or sent money to family members instead. Contrary to the institutionally mandated disconnection between prisoners and teaching artists outside of sanctioned projects, my collaborations involve ongoing communication with not only the incarcerated collaborators themselves but also, in many cases, their broader networks of supporters who have been instrumental in helping to transmit messages and materials. One collaborator's friend who had Power of Attorney opened an outside bank account for her so that she could receive payment from me, a way to bypass the 45% confiscated by the Department of Corrections on any amount over \$25 sent to a prisoner. These extended networks are less present in the two projects discussed in this paper, since they both feature a single collaborator with whom I have a long-standing relationship. The complex nexus of people and resources that I employ to circumvent prison delays, censorship, and other administrative obstacles is documented by an earlier volume of *Abolition Film Society*, a process-oriented piece where I curated a program of experimental films for a group of five inside participants, some of whom I knew on a more personal level and some with whom I

was only connected in my capacity as a Prisoner Correspondence Project member. Since prisoners did not have access to video sharing websites like Youtube or Vimeo or the ability to receive DVDs by mail, I had to distribute the films from the curated program within the limitation of the prison system: as stills and transcripts by mail, audio played over the phone, and low-resolution 30-second video excerpts for those who had access to a platform called Jpay Videograms.

The differences between my approach and the nonprofit arts programming identified by Fleetwood leads to different — in fact, opposing — set of tensions. Fleetwood’s account of inside-outside collaborations often presents a dynamic where the radical demands of prisoners are muted by collaborators on the outside who are navigating the constraints of their institutionally embedded position. Fleetwood writes that many of the collaborations she has seen “focus on personal exploration and individualized notions of rehabilitation while avoiding or obfuscating political and systemic critiques of incarceration.” (Fleetwood 2020, 155) Citing the Attica prison rebellion manifesto, which refuted the purported rehabilitative function of the prison system, Fleetwood celebrates the work of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), a contemporaneous groups of Black artists allies, for “follow[ing] the lead of Attica protestors, listening to their needs in refuting state-mandated ideas of rehabilitation.” (Fleetwood 2020, 165)

In my experience in prisoner solidarity as well as labour organizing, I have more frequently encountered the opposite dynamic. Contrary to the nonprofit workers identified by Fleetwood as imposing a reformist agenda of individual rehabilitation, the outside organizers I am familiar with tend to be the ones coming in with “political and systemic critiques.” In Prisoner Correspondence Project and, as the next chapter will detail, my artistic collaborations, the people with direct experience with incarceration tend to be far more invested in the project of individual rehabilitation, particularly when it comes their own personal development. In abolitionist as well as labour organizing, many prisoners and workers with direct experience are much more supportive than outside organizers towards reforms that

would incrementally improve daily circumstances, even if they do little to undermine generalized conditions of captivity or exploitation.

This set of tensions, which I have experienced again and again across organizing and creative collaborations, is more challenging to navigate than the mismatch between radical prisoners and reformist outsiders in Fleetwood's focus. In this case, following the lead of people with direct experience, like Fleetwood commends BECC for doing, would mean abandoning commitment to more radical goals — for example, PCP would cease to be an abolitionist organization if it were to ever determine its own political framework based on a vote by the inside membership, the vast majority of whom do not believe that prisons should be abolished. Yet ignoring the reformist or even reactionary input from people with direct experience, dismissing it as “false consciousness” in pursuit of the most radical agenda, would reinforce the power dynamics that Fleetwood identifies with many prison arts collaborations, “in which the nonincarcerated are deemed as artists while the incarcerated participants are the subject matter or objects of art.” (Fleetwood 2020, 155)

Organizing alongside people who have direct experience with particular systems of oppression, as someone who does not share that experience, is a more complex practice than either deference or inculcation, requiring ongoing, active discernment from the outside organizer. This relationship is fraught with potential for conflicts that threaten to rupture the tenuous ties of solidarity necessary for coalitional politics. The next chapters detail the ways that this has manifested for me in the context of working with Amber in *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* and *You May Start the Conversation Now*.

ABOLITION FILM SOCIETY: FLIPBOOK CINEMA

Reading Group and Discussions

Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema began with a six-month reading group. Since Amber does not have access to search engines for conducting independent research, I was the one to choose the texts, which I selected in response to a core question from Amber that emerged in a conversation before the start of our reading group:

The one big question I have is "Why are so many activists so opposed to putting together a 'ten year plan' of fighting various smaller battles that then amount to a larger change once everything is in place?" Which is really what I'm thinking. I'm not talking about just going for low hanging fruit (which only results in non-reforms), I'm talking about moving towards the ultimate goal in a tactical structured fashion. I don't get why we don't do that. (Amber Kim, electronic message to author, April 1, 2022)

Our reading group featured books and articles on abolitionist politics, organizing strategies, and artistic engagements with incarceration (a list of the texts we read and discussed is on page 5 of the publication included in Appendix A). I bought and sent books to Amber's facility and shared articles by copying, pasting, and maxing out character limits across multiple Jpay messages. Partway through our reading group, Kay Gabriel, the author of one of the articles we read, began hosting a weekly online reading group on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Abolition Geography* that Amber and I participated in. I sent Amber the reading schedule, shared her comments on relevant chapters at each meeting, then sent discussion notes back to her.

Throughout this project, Amber and I engaged in extensive discussions: the entirety our written messages and phone transcripts amount to 67,000 words. Near the end of the project, I mailed the totality of our conversations to Amber (size nine font, three packages of fifteen sheets printed double-sided to fit the prison mail room's page limit regulation). After receiving these packages, Amber called me to

identify excerpts that stood out to her. I compiled the conversation snippets that each of us selected, edited the text for style and length, then designed a booklet of this text to accompany the flipbooks.

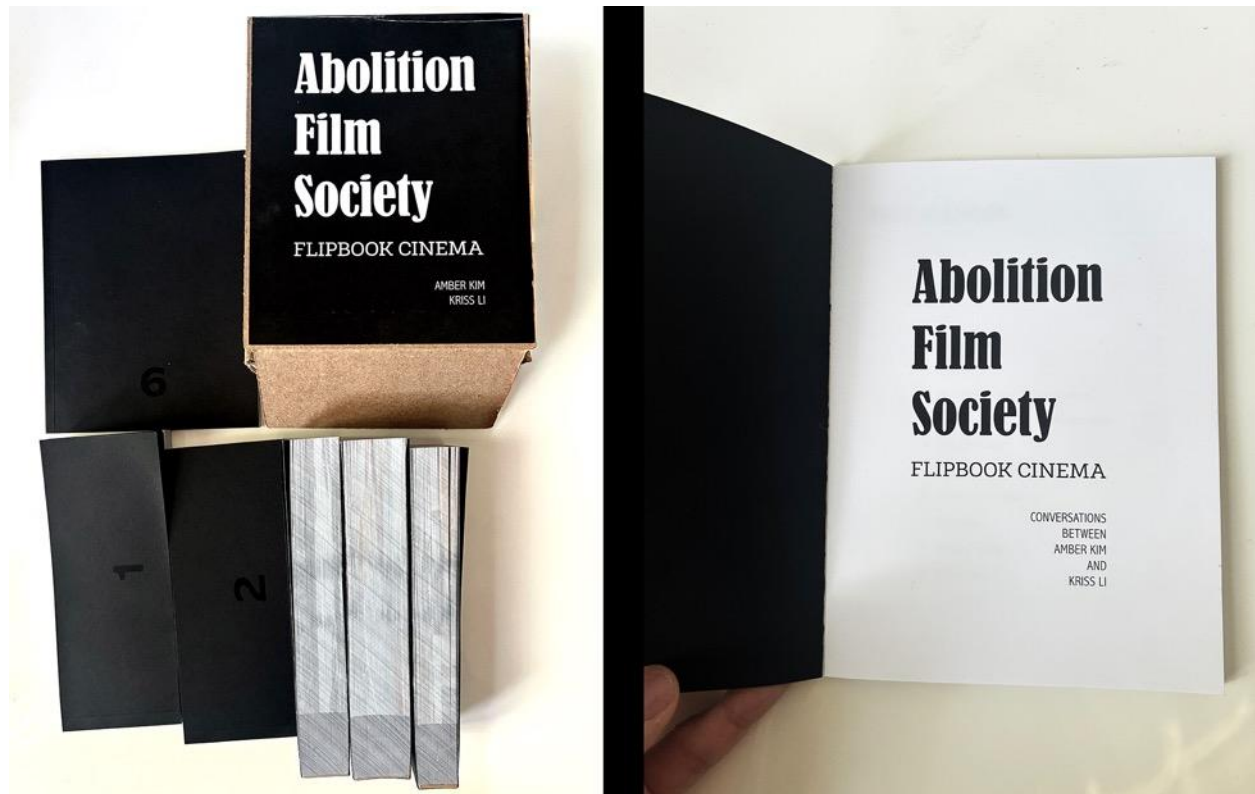


Image 1. *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* publications.

The published version of our conversations is included in Appendix A. Below, I will include a few key discussions that are most relevant to understanding the video piece that emerged out of the reading group.

One topic that Amber and I talked about extensively was a company called Correctional Industries, a private corporation that receives contracts from the Department of Justice in order to manage prisoners to manufacture goods such as license plates, boxes, glasses, rolling desk chairs, and uniforms. According to Amber, Correctional Industries is one of the strongest blocs of power within the

Washington Department of Corrections. They have a strong lobbying arm and a lot of influence over how the prison is run. For example, during the COVID lockdowns, Correctional Industries lobbied for all their workers to get housed in the same unit, and the prisons followed the request.

Correctional Industries hires a large number of prisoners, but the way this company operates does not fit into popular understanding of prison labour. After the release of Ava DuVernay's *13th*, which presents prisons as exploiting the “loophole” of the 13th Amendment that outlawed involuntary servitude except as a punishment, many people have come to think of prison labour as an extension of slave labour — as extracting profit from a worker whose labour is highly exploited. The idea is that prisons give prisoners a nominal payment of couple cents an hour and sell their goods at a high margin, making profit on the gap between wages and profit. Yet this is not how Correctional Industries, or prison labour in general, operate.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore provides a rigorous rebuttal to the focus on private profits within the prison system, seen in accounts like the film *13th*. Rachel Kushner's precis of this analysis, in her profile of Gilmore in *The New York Times*, is worth quoting in full:

Government agencies don't make profits; instead, they need revenue. State agencies must compete for this revenue, Gilmore explained. Under austerity, the social-welfare function shrinks; the agencies that receive the money are the police, firefighters and corrections. So other agencies start to copy what the police do: The education department, for instance, learns that it can receive money for metal detectors much more easily than it can for other kinds of facility upgrades. And prisons can access funds that traditionally went elsewhere — for example, money goes to county jails and state prisons for “mental health services” rather than into public health generally. “If you follow the money, you don't have to find the company that's profiting,” Gilmore explained to me later. “You can find all the people who are dependent on wages paid out by the Department of Corrections. The most powerful lobby group in California are the guards. It's a single trade, with

one employer, and it couldn't be easier for them to organize. They can elect everyone from D.A.s up to the governor. They gave Gray Davis a couple million dollars, and he gave them a prison.”

The explicit function of prison is to separate people from society, and this costs money. Fifteen and a half billion dollars of the proposed budget for the coming year will go to corrections, and 40 percent of that goes to staff salaries alone, not including benefits and generous pensions. This is state-subsidized employment, not a profit venture. (Kushner 2019)

Though the comparison between prison labour and slave labour solicits a powerful emotional condemnation against prisons, Gilmore enables us to see that this analysis misses the system's actual designs, and risks misleading organizing efforts towards the wrong target. In practice, this focus on the profit motive has led many reformists to concentrate their energy on shutting down private for-profit prisons, which hold only 8% of all incarcerated people in the U.S. and have no presence the Canadian system after the only experiment with a privately run jail returned to public control in the 2000s. (Sawyer and Wagner 2025; CBC News 2006) It also leads to a misunderstanding of the material relationship between companies like Correctional Industries, the Washington State Department of Corrections, and prisoners like Amber whose work is managed by Correctional Industries.

Like most companies that use prisoners as workers, the production process managed by Correctional Industries is not geared towards making profit. Correctional Industries does not sell goods on the open market. Like many prison employment programs, the government pays Correctional Industries money to hire prisoners to make goods that the government then purchases in return. Correctional Industries costs the government money and functions as providing a kind of state-sponsored education and jobs training program to incarcerated people. Money gets funneled through prisoners working for this company, and the company makes money by hiring prisoners, but it does not make money by exploiting the prisoners' labour then selling the products of their labour for a profit. When I asked Amber what incarcerated workers are to Correctional Industries if not a labour force to be exploited for profits, she

explained: “In this situation, the prisoners are a renewable resource. You know, the same way you manage your timber land, you manage your inmates.” (Appendix A: Conversations, “Washington State Prison System”)

An analysis that sees prison labour as an extension of exploited slave labour would find a solution in eradicating prison labour programs — which would remove one of the few activities, however unstimulating, that currently interrupts the long stretches of boredom that prisoners otherwise experience (and as Amber notes in a conversation included in *You May Start The Conversation Now*, the workplace is typically one of the few places in a racially segregated prison where different races mix together, lending itself to opportunities for cross-racial organizing). On the other hand, recognizing companies like Correctional Industries as providing a subcontracted, diminished version of public service opens up a different set up political demands: for a better use of state resources that bypasses punitive state agencies and parasitic subcontractors and goes directly towards meaningful public education and jobs training for the “modestly educated women and men in the prime of their lives” who are kept in long-term incapacitation within the prison system.

In our conversations, Amber and I agreed on many things, but we also had disagreements. One disagreement that would come up again and again is one of scale. As someone who has never been incarcerated and who engages with prisons from the perspective of an organizer, my analysis of the carceral system took place at an institutional and societal scale. Though Amber has read extensive analyses about the prison system, her intimate experience from the inside led her to a greater emphasis on individual experiences. Throughout our conversations, Amber spoke about the importance of taking individual responsibility for past harms and the necessity of rehabilitation. Hearing this, I would often try bringing the conversation towards systems of power and the ways that racial and economic structures shape us in manners beyond our control as individual agents. In moments that Amber expressed disapproval of other prisoners who weren’t doing more to better themselves inside, the way she has, I

would push back about the unfairness in placing that expectation onto people who faced compounded systemic barriers.

While difficult at times, these disagreements were also generative, leading me to questions about political strategy that I had never considered before our reading group. Our reading group took place during a time that abolitionist politics were coalescing around a divest/reinvest focus, with organizers frequently citing a statement attributed to Ruth Wilson Gilmore: “Abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions.”¹ Prison abolition became not only about closing down prisons — though that was part of the work — the main focus became about changing the kind of society where state violence is seen as the only way to address harm. In this view, abolitionist politics became an effort to redistribute collective state-managed resources: away from punitive institutions and into life affirming infrastructure. As someone who spent many years in radical political settings where abolition was limited to grandiose statements about setting fires to prisons without concrete political agendas to shrink the prison system, I welcomed this redistributive turn in abolitionist politics.

In our reading group, Amber and I had ongoing debates about whether building new education, arts, and therapeutic facilities inside prisons should fall into abolitionist demands. Like many abolitionists, I have been inclined to reject reformist efforts to build nicer or more rehabilitative facilities as thinly veiled efforts to pour more money into prison expansion. For as long as prisons have existed, reformers have sought to address the humanitarian crises inside them by building new jails that promised to be better, more modern, and more rehabilitative. Yet these innovative facilities would soon run into as many problems as the jails they sought to replace.² Instead of calling to reform the prison system,

¹ This quote has become ubiquitous in mission statements, infographics, and think pieces related to prison abolition over the last few years. However, I cannot locate the provenance of the original quote after following several citations to Gilmore’s speeches or interviews where the quote does not, in fact, appear. The viral quote is likely a paraphrase of Gilmore’s writings elsewhere, for example “Abolition is not *absence*, it is *presence*...Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can.” (Gilmore 2018, her emphasis)

² As Foucault famously writes, “Prison ‘reform’ is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme.” (Foucault 1995, 234)

abolitionists focus on decarceration efforts — reducing the number of people in prisons and jails, shutting down facilities without replacing them, and rejecting government spending for renovations. (Critical Resistance 2021)

While Amber supported the broader abolitionist struggle to work towards a world without prisons, she disagreed with the divestment strategy to reject government spending on facilities that promised to improve living conditions and support rehabilitative developments. Many abolitionists are weary of the rhetoric of rehabilitating prisoners at all, seeing it as a symptom of treating the structural crises of racial capitalism as a matter of individual pathology. Amber has a different view on rehabilitation, and I have thought often about this comment from her:

I'm in prison, I've been in here for fifteen years. So when it comes to how do we change society, I feel like I'm not qualified to answer that question. At the same time, because I've been in prison so long and have been doing the work to reform myself, I feel I am qualified to speak on how to get people who are in prison to grow while in here and not cause further harm in the future upon release. (Appendix A: Conversations, “Prisoners in Abolitionist Movements”)

This comment from Amber left a strong impression on me, helping me recognize a potential pitfall in the redistributive turn in abolitionist organizing. If prison abolition has become a politics of resource redistribution across the entire society — as much about prisons as it is about housing, education, and healthcare — where does that leave currently incarcerated people in this fight? I came to see that approaching abolitionist organizing through high level policy changes has the potential to undermine the agency of prisoners in this process, where prisoners would end up merely as symbols while outside organizers did the real political work.

The topic of prisoners’ agency in relation to outside organizers was at the heart of a conversation where I found myself caught in a moment of thoughtless oversight. In a conversation about the limits of allyship, Amber expressed skepticism about the utility of political allies. Drawing on repeated negative

experiences with an outside group that would routinely impose their own agenda in campaigns that included both incarcerated and nonincarcerated people, Amber wrote:

The reality is I don't actually put much stock in political allies because it is usually a goal driven relationship that does not last very long. I much prefer to be a political co-conspirator working for each other's liberation. This is a long-term relationship that involves getting to know each other in a much more meaningful way. (Appendix A: Conversations, "Allies & Power")

I pushed back against this, questioning the inclination to devalue short-term alliances when it came to accomplishing specific goals that would require mass power. I saw the limitation in relying on only people who we know in long-term, meaningful ways — a number too small to successfully challenge elites with access to money, favourable laws, and influences on media. Responding to Amber's negative experiences with the outside group, I questioned whether these experiences necessitated never working with this group again, or if there could be ways to leverage the group's resources that would not be dependent on them coming in with good faith. I wrote:

If the power dynamic was so entrenched to be unchangeable, then I think you'd make the right call to avoid working with certain outside groups. But I also wonder if there could be creative strategies to keep those groups accountable, and maybe you have access to resources that you wouldn't have considered if you just made the call to never work with them again. (Appendix A: Conversations, "Allies & Power")

After some reflection, I realized that my comment was inconsiderate of just how little power prisoners have in comparison to an outside group and regretted not acknowledging this openly in my earlier message. Amber agreed with my assessment in calling out myself on this, and we continued the discussion. Neither of us moved to the other's position but I, at least, found this to be a generative moment of tension.

In addition to these political investigations, Amber and I also had conversations about the mundane details of her daily life, such as the food she was making as a kitchen worker feeding over 500

people, making forty-two cents an hour. We talked about her relationships to other people inside, including friends in a different pod. One of those discussions, about Amber's conversations with friends in a different pod, became the genesis of our concept for the two-channel short film and flipbooks, which I will describe in the next section.

Production

From the start, I knew I wanted to make a film that could be turned into flipbooks. While I could share video clips with Amber, and other prisoners on my contact list who are eligible to receive thirty-second "videograms" on their tablets, there is no way to mass distribute an independent art film like the ones that I create. Creating flipbooks that could eventually be distributed inside prison libraries is a way to circumvent this limitation and create a film that could eventually be shared with a prison audience.

The format of the flipbook carries a set of formal constraints. First, video designed for print needs to be silent. While subtitles could capture the essence of dialogue, a crucial element in the sonic experience of watching a sound film would be lost when printed onto silent pages. Creating a film without sound in the first place enables the flipbook viewer to have a less diminished experience of the project. Videos designated for flipbook output also need to be short. A video typically runs at twenty-four or thirty frames per second. Even when reduced to, say, three frames per second for a flipbook, a minute of footage would still run 180 pages. As a book gets thicker, it also becomes more difficult to flip by hand, so the length of the video needs to take into consideration the physicality of the printed and bounded form. *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*, at six minutes and twenty-five seconds, is far too long for a single flipbook. Accordingly, the film is divided into five shorter segments that are each bound into a separate book.

The five segments feature the following phrases:

- I AM JOB SECURITY FOR CO ROBERTS

- I AM LYING IN GRASS AND MY HEART FEELS LIGHT
- I AM TO CORRECTIONAL INDUSTRIES AS LUMBER IS TO REAL ESTATE
- I AM COOKING SLOP FOR 537 PEOPLE SO I CAN EAT RAMEN FOR THE 1000TH DAY IN A ROW
- I ENJOYED 58 BOOKS LAST YEAR

These phrases capture the array of topics that emerged during the reading group between Amber and me, acting as a kind of documentary of our conversations. This text emerged out of an attention to scale inspired by the geographical method that Ruth Wilson Gilmore employs to examine racism in *Abolition Geography*:

...the realities of racism are not the same everywhere and represent different practices at different geographical scales — which are connected (or “articulated”) in many ways. Within and across scales — respectively configuring nation-states, production regions, labor markets, communities, households, and bodies — anti-racist activism encounters supple enactments and renewals of racialization through law, policy, and legal and illegal practices performed by state and non-state actors. (Gilmore 2022, 114)

Similarly, the film’s five phrases trace various conflicting yet continuous configurations of a prisoner across multiple levels, from the quotidian to the systemic.

The film represents the five phrases in two ways. On the left channel we see Amber on video visit, spelling out the script using Stacking, an ASL-adapted sign language employed by prisoners to communicate across plexiglass or long distances. The focus is on her hands, and we do not see her face. Behind her we see signs of other people, including someone pushing a mop bucket and someone moving through the background using a walker. Right channel shows visual interpretation of the text that Amber spells out by hand, sometimes dramatized by anonymous hands (performed by former and current outside collective members of Prisoner Correspondence Project).

The discussions between Amber and me that led up to the style and content of the film are captured by the chapters “Stacking” and “Making a Film” in the publication included in Appendix A, which provide excerpted transcriptions from two of our phone calls that took place two days apart. Those calls unfolded during the period following our intensive reading group, when we were struggling to translate political analysis and debates about organizational strategy into a creative project. Then, like magic, the entire film emerged in nearly its final form in the second phone call.

The direction for the film quickly came together after those conversations. Amber and I finalized the phrases we would use, and I filmed the images that made up the right channel, which visually interpreted the text. Editing the video on the right channel allowed me to determine the timing of the text that Amber would spell out using Stacking on the left channel. I had wanted the stacking video to be a single take, with no cuts, so timing it properly in relation to the right channel was important. Then, Amber and I filmed the stacking video in a video visit. I placed a video sequence of the timing-aligned text on an iPad placed on top of my camera and filmed Amber as she stacked the text that came up.



Image 2. *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* production still.

At the Paper Machine printshop in New Orleans, I turned stills from the videos into flipbooks, which are held inside a box alongside the publication of our excerpted and edited conversations.



Image 3. *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* inside flipbook.



Image 4. *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* box view.

I received ten boxes of books from Paper Machine. I am still exploring different options for getting boxes into prison, which is somewhat complicated by mail room regulation, which typically accepts only books sent from corporate bookstores like Amazon and Barnes & Noble or directly from publishers. I am in the process of researching possibilities for working with a books to prisoners program or an independent publisher to get some copies inside.

The flipbooks, publication of our conversations, and two-channel video, shown on a loop allowing the viewer to enter at any point in the projection, were exhibited at Dazibao Contemporary Art Centre in fall 2024.

Reflections

After the completion of the film, Amber and I had an extended conversation, in writing and by phone, reflecting on the process. This conversation, excerpted in the “Reflections” chapter in the publication included in Appendix A, openly discusses tensions in our relationship — particularly my own desire for creative control, as well as moments when I pressured Amber to see prisons, something she knows intimately, from my perspective, which is based on experience from organizing from the outside. At the end, Amber leaves this reflection on inside-outside collaborations:

The biggest thing that I think is important to throw out there is that having truly collaborative processes between people on the inside and people on the outside is desperately needed, because we have all of these people talking about prisoners with prisoners not involved. But with that, there also has to be a recognition of the level of commitment on the part of people on both sides of the wall, but especially on the outside. Going through the shit with the person on the inside...because you went through some shit with me on getting this figured out. Freaking my cell moves, all these different things that I’m only having to deal with because I’m in prison and I don’t have an option of not dealing with it because I’m in prison.

Recognizing that and recognizing there's economic disparity, there's power disparity, there's in many cases...like that one conversation we had where you had this kernel of hope that you're going to change my worldview with all the readings and it's like, *I've been doing this critique and doing this work for over a decade*. I have the position I have and it's gonna take a pretty big burden of proof to shift that at this point, because I literally live it. Recognize that when you're collaborating with people on the inside, we have our viewpoints because of the things we've been through. That doesn't make our viewpoints right, it just makes it radically different than someone who's been on the outside. (Appendix A: Conversations, "Reflections")

These conversations between Amber and me were central to my conception and experience of *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*, which I designed as a space to explore a relationship of creation across power differences, including constructive mistakes. Yet these conversations were peripheral to the exhibition format of the project, only accessible by reading the accompanying booklet or attending my presentation discussing the project, which included recordings from phone calls. Our next project includes more of the conversations so critical to the collaborative process between Amber and me.

YOU MAY START THE CONVERSATION NOW

You May Start the Conversation Now was created three years after the start of the reading group that launched *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*. In the period between the two projects, Amber and I spoke casually about a future collaboration where I could adapt by video a story that she writes, giving each of us control about different facets of the project. Amber was particularly interested in writing about the outlaw of romantic relationships inside prison, a prohibition of intimacy experienced especially acutely by prisoners with extended sentences like Amber, who has been serving life without parole since she was a teenager. Due to mismatch in our capacities at different times, we did not seriously pursue this collaboration.

The collaboration behind *You May Start the Conversation Now* happened incidentally, a swerve in direction for a residency that I had applied to as an independent artist. The project arose out of Amber's generous offer to help me get through a moment of creative block. Working with her enabled me to free the film's narrative from the pressures of political applicability and experiment with a new collaborative container.

Worldbuilding Residency

You May Start the Conversation Now originated from a residency called *New Suns: A Worldbuilding Lab for Radical Futures* organized by Artengine, an artist-run centre in Ottawa. Against the popularity of dystopian fiction, the residency was created with the aim of using science fiction techniques towards "radically optimistic" ends, in order to generate "actionable visions for transformative change." (Artengine 2024) I was drawn to the idea of an exercise to develop political imagination with other artists and responded to the open call, despite being a casual fan of speculative fiction with deep connection to only a few works in the genre.

I was selected with seven other interdisciplinary artists to participate in a collaborative worldbuilding exercise over the course of a weekend in Ottawa, guided by science fiction writer Suyi Davies Okungbowa. After a series of workshops about science fiction and an exercise where participants took turns adding details to a futuristic world, Okungbowa synthesized contributions from all the artists into an initial worldbuilding document titled “Human+: A world of hybridized humanity.” This document depicts a world following a period of heightened extraction, consolidated power, and intensified ecological crises, where we have turned to a shapeshifting transmutation technology called Human+ that allows us to transform into other entities at a cellular level. The ability to hybridize with our surroundings leads to fundamental shifts, including fluid identities beyond contemporary racial and gender categories, deconstructed experiences of “home,” the ability to withstand extreme environmental conditions, and a sense of kinship with all existing and ancestral beings.

Following the worldbuilding weekend in Ottawa, each artist was given six months to develop an individual work based on the Human+ worldbuilding document. I would spend most of those six months struggling to connect with the utopian vision that emerged from the lab. I had a hard time locating the residency’s stated aim of “actionable visions for transformative change” — the element that I had found most compelling — in this document. Rather than grappling with existing problems within a fictionalized setting, our collective exercise skipped directly from a state of widespread crisis to an idealized outcome. The transition between states of dystopian near-future to utopian far-future occurs as the result of technological developments resembling magic. This mirrors many contemporary debates about technology, especially about artificial intelligence, which treat technological progress as a disembodied force outside of human agency that would autonomously determine the direction of the future for better or for worse. Notably absent in the worldbuilding document, as in debates about whether automation would improve or undermine the future of humanity, is politics: struggles between organized masses of people over the distribution of power and resources that I see as key to deciding the future. As Peter Frase writes in his speculative exercise *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*, “who benefits from automation, and who

loses, is ultimately a consequence not of the robots themselves, but who owns them.” (Frase 2016, chap.

1)

My objections to the worldbuilding outcome paralyzed, rather than catalyzed, my creative process. As other artists finalized the direction of their project and made progress on production, I was frantically reading political theory, hoping to find a text would point me to an idea that resonated. One day, while updating Amber on my life over a Securus message, I shared my struggles with the residency and compared the research overload I was experiencing to the moment in the making of *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*, after our reading group, when we had spent several weeks without a clear path leading us from research to creation. In response, Amber wrote:

...research is generally a solitary activity whereas creation is generally a communal activity.

What is there in shifting from one state to the other that changes what you know? From my perspective that’s what broke the logjam when we were working together. Theory becomes praxis through small everyday actions. Since I have nothing but time, feel free to talk through your theory overload with me. (Amber Kim, electronic message to author, April 26, 2025)

I was eager to take up Amber’s offer, knowing that she had a far deeper relationship to science fiction than I did. I sent her the worldbuilding document and we talked on the phone about my challenges working with the premises. Despite sharing many of my criticisms of the worldbuilding, Amber did not hesitate to generate a stream of story ideas. Listening to her presented me with a vision of spending the remaining weeks of the residency creating playful narratives together — a far more appealing prospect than aimlessly wading through my grievances about a fictional document’s theory of change. I invited Amber to work on the project with me, and she accepted.

Development and Production

Amber and I began writing a series of dialogues between two characters based on fictionalized versions of the two of us as hosts of a news program, a decision that we came to together. Those roles

offer glimpses of an unfolding futuristic world into the characters' broadcasted commentaries. Significant time jumps exist between scenes, revealing a rapidly shifting world surrounding the shapeshifting technology of Human+. We see contradictory uses and effects of Human+ as political powers shift within this timeline: sold by a corporation as an expensive hobby, given to tenants by landowners in exchange for compliance with being evicted into hostile environmental conditions, inciting religious fundamentalist anti-shapeshifting backlash, being appropriated by ecological warriors who turn their bodies in toxins-absorbing plants, and more.

I was the one to propose the container for our collaborative writing process, which took place within a structure based on exquisite corpse, the Surrealist collaborative art game where participants collaboratively add to a drawing or a text without seeing the entirety of the previous contribution. Most commonly, exquisite corpse is played when one person begins a drawing then folds the paper to cover everything except a few centimetres, passes the paper to the next participant to continue and then fold over before passing it on, and so on and so forth until the entire paper is covered. At the end, the piece of paper is unfolded to unveil the surprising work resulting from partially informed collaborations. Amber and I took turns writing a scene, sending a "tail" of final sentences to the other, then continuing the scene based on the mysterious phrases we received.

This process diverges from *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*, where we worked on and made decisions together at all stages of the conceptualization, only to diverge in the filmmaking itself, due to Amber's physical inability to contribute to that stage of production. I was interested in the exquisite corpse format, on the one hand, as a way to ease the pressure of coherence in a moment where my imagination was feeling constrained by a sense of duty to politically applicable sense-making. On the other hand, the gaps built into the foundation of this new set of creative exchanges reflect my findings from the previous project. At the end of *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*, I noted that I was not sure that I wanted to work on a project in the same way again. Highlighting the disparity in power and resources between Amber and me, I acknowledged the tensions that would never truly disappear in

inside-outside projects like the one we were undertaking. I wrote, “I don’t think that tension is inherently bad, though perhaps approaching a project like a collaboration doesn’t actually capture the inevitable unease of the process.” (Appendix A: Conversations, “Reflections”)

I find the most generative part of *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema* to be moments of conversation that revealed Amber’s and my distinct perspectives and social positions, something invisible from the project’s centrepiece, the two-channel video. I wanted to foreground this separation in *You May Start the Conversation Now*. Rather than attempting to create a seamless collaboration where Amber and I worked together as a single entity, the exquisite corpse exercise provided a structure for the two of us to co-create without fully grasping each other’s intentions, which were obfuscated from one another by design.

This sense of separation permeates the final film, which foregrounds the distinct worlds that Amber and I inhabited as we wrote and communicated with one another across a highly surveilled platform. In the film, the fictional dialogues are visualized through a day of filmed rehearsals, with people close to me making up cast, crew, prop designer, and a handful of audience members inside a neighbourhood park in Montréal. Footage of this queer and trans community gathering is interrupted by audio of phone calls between Amber and me recorded during our writing process, covering topics like censorship, developments in carceral technology, solidarity and collective action, and Amber’s daily experiences. Our conversations, which made up peripheral materials in *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*, become central to *You May Start the Conversation Now*.

The presence of Amber’s voice is a spectre of her physical absence from my collective life, which she cannot access as she serves a life sentence without parole. Even if Amber does successfully receive a resentencing for being released in her forties, a long struggle that she has been undertaking over the last several years, she is unlikely to ever cross the border into Canada due to her criminal record. The contrast between intimate phone calls and the public outdoor space of the sunny park, populated with my friends, is made particularly stark by Amber’s recent months held indefinitely in solitary confinement, as she

awaits a hearing on whether she could remain in a women's prison after an infraction, an experience she references at one point in our calls.

Near the end of *You May Start the Conversation Now*, our two worlds momentarily converge through a real-time phone call where Amber speaks directly to the two performers embodying our dialogues. This meeting is fleeting. After the call ends, I introduce a scene written by Amber to friends who have come to view a performance of the rehearsal. Amber's presence in this outside space is manifestly mediated by me — a dynamic across all of our collaborations, as Amber's connection beyond prison is necessarily facilitated by outside contacts like me.

The version of the project that I created for the *New Suns* residency showcase, designed for installation, centered on the power of technology so as to be in dialogue with the rest of the residents' works on view. This initial version featured multiple conversations, in both phone call recordings and performed fictionalized dialogues, that explicitly discussed the capacity of different social actors to use the same technology towards opposing ends. In my thesis portfolio piece, newly edited as a stand-alone film, this theme of technology takes form via the contradictory role that the Securus messaging platform plays in Amber's and my relationship. In phone calls, we repeatedly discuss Securus messages withheld from delivery for no perceivable reason. Nonetheless, this digital technology enables as much as it impedes our communication, providing a conduit between us while Amber is held in isolation.

Compared to the previous project, *You May Start the Conversation Now* involved a much briefer, more playful process that engaged with narrative elements, not of our own choosing, from the *New Suns* worldbuilding document. While the project produced less explicit reflection about my relationship with Amber, it was an opportunity to experiment with a new, less intertwined approach to co-creation that responded to insights from the earlier collaboration. As the *Conclusion* details, I will further develop this structure of creative exchange in my next project.

CONCLUSION

Writing about prison art collaborations, Nicole Fleetwood proposes reimagining to change “the outcomes and goals of participatory art practices from a scenario where some return to cages and others to their private homes.” (Fleetwood 2020, 162) Reading this, I am struck by Fleetwood’s problem framing. Why does she not end the phrase at “some return to cages?” The scenario where some people must return to cages after a participatory art session clearly needs to change, and this is the aim of the abolitionist movement: to create a new social order where no one needs to go into cages. But what is the change required by the return of “others to their private homes” that Fleetwood frames as a problem? Would art practices involving prisoners be better off without the presence of outside collaborators who enjoy the privilege of having a home? Fleetwood does not herself make this claim, but I have encountered people in progressive milieus who do. In this view, the disparity in privilege between inside and outside means that outside engagement with prisoners is inherently compromised by the logic of extraction. Accordingly, rather than engaging with issues with which they have no direct experience, outside artists should focus on making work about their own lives and social positions.

I see this view as contrary to project of abolition. To build the level of power necessary to defeat the coalition invested in the continuation of the prison system — including state agencies fearful of losing funding, correctional workers’ unions, subcontracted companies, and politicians eager to scapegoat the destabilizing effects of economic crises onto a small group of people — an organized counter-coalition will require the participation of many, many people, including many people with homes. The fact that these people have homes is a good thing. Fighting for a society where everyone has homes is part of the abolitionist agenda because, in a society where everyone had homes, fewer people would be locked up in prison, one of the few remaining forms of state-funded social housing for people who have nowhere else to go. This potential for solidarity between housed, unhoused, and caged people is captured by the Los

Angeles Tenants' Union's expanded usage of the term *tenant* to describe "anyone who doesn't control their housing, who inhabits but doesn't own." (Rosenthal and Vilchis 2024, 12)

Maintaining an *effective* coalition requires building trust across different experiences, and this means being attentive to the ways that power dynamics — including the power dynamics between housed, unhoused, and caged people — shape interactions. It also means being open to admitting fault or oversight and cultivating enough connection to continue working together even in face of inevitable frictions. Developing skills for these practices requires ongoing engagement with collaboration across differences, the opposite of abstaining from experiences outside of one's own, and this carries the risk of finding ourselves acting and reacting in ways that do not always meet our own visions of how we want to be. Nonetheless, in the words of Gilmar Mauro of Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, "It is much better for all of us to discuss, plan, and make a mistake collectively than for each of us to do the right thing as individuals."³ (Bevins 2025)

The collaborations in my thesis portfolio are practices for developing my own capacity for solidarity inside a creative container with smaller scale and lower stakes than a political campaign. I am grateful to Amber for taking part in these long processes with me, especially her willingness to challenge me repeatedly. I hope that she has gained something from these exchanges as well. My next project will collectivize the form of inside-outside co-creation that I have been undergoing with Amber. In the two projects discussed in this paper, I played a dual role: as both artist-collaborator and the creator of the relational container within which the artistic activities took place. For the next project, I will focus on facilitating and documenting the relational dynamics of collaboration while others do the creative work, similar to one of the possibilities for future projects that I discuss as an alternative to an interwoven approach to collaboration in my reflection following *Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema*: "the setup

³ A rephrasing, for the contemporary moment, of Rosa Luxemburg's declaration that "Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee." (Luxemburg 1904)

where I play a supporting role in your project that you have control over, which I merely help facilitate.”
(Appendix A: Conversations, “Reflections”)

The next edition of *Abolition Film Society* will coordinate a circle of creative exchanges between a group of prisoners and a group of youths on the outside. After receiving independent artworks created by the youths, the incarcerated participants will each write a short screenplay in response to the works in some way. Then, with my support, the youths will create a single short film that incorporates some elements of all screenplays. I will offer skillshare sessions for participants inside and outside, facilitate the relational dynamics, and create a living archive of the project as it unfolds. Following the trajectory that I began in *You May Start the Conversation Now*, this circle of creative exchange is focused not on one group faithfully representing the other’s work, but a kind of co-creation that maintains a gap between the practice of representation and what is represented. This gap speaks to the inevitable friction that will always come with working with incarcerated people from the outside, both in terms of physical and administrative barrier as well as unequal power dynamics. The project aims to explore how to maintain connection in face of this distance, rather than treating distance as an intractable barrier to connection or proceeding as if connection was enough to negate distance. Amber has agreed to act as my advisor on this project and offer feedback throughout the process from the perspective of someone who has first-hand experience of my strengths and weaknesses in this setting of inside-outside exchange.

In the future, I would love to facilitate collaborations between incarcerated people and organized structures, such as public service workers’ unions, which could offer insights to dynamics particular to various strategic alliances that are required for abolitionist movement building. For larger scale collaborations, I am also interested in incorporating more democratic decision structures into the relational container where creative co-creation takes place.

In a conversation about the contemporary political conjuncture at the 2024 Socialism Conference, organizer and legal scholar Amna A. Akbar stated, “I think we’ve gotten really good at critique and really good at imagination, but the practice of how we get from the world as it is to the world that we hope to

build — that part is still really hard.” (Amna Akbar 2024) I hope that the creative exchanges that I facilitate can make a small contribution towards strengthening the practice that we need to build the world without prisons that we want to win.

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Abolition Film Society

FLIPBOOK CINEMA

CONVERSATIONS
BETWEEN
AMBER KIM
AND
KRISS LI

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Introduction

Abolition Film Society: Flipbook Cinema is a collaboration between Kriss Li, filmmaker and multimedia artist, and Amber Kim, an activist and author incarcerated in Washington State.

Amber and Kriss met through Prisoner Correspondence Project (PCP), a Montreal-based volunteer-run initiative that supports over 4000 LGBTQ prisoners across Canada and the US through a free penpal program, resource library, and newsletter. Kriss has been organizing with PCP since 2009 and Amber is a member of the Inside Collective, which reads and responds to monthly meeting minutes from the outside collective.

Amber and Kriss engaged in a six-month reading group by phone and Jpay, a for-profit online communication system for prisoners. We then collaboratively conceptualized a script based on their readings and discussions, which Kriss used to produce a two-channel short film.

Left channel features Amber on video visit spelling out the script using *stacking*, a sign language adapted from American Sign Language (ASL) employed by prisoners to communicate across plexiglass or long distances. Right channel shows visual interpretation of the text.

The film was turned into a series of flipbooks to mail into prison. The short film, flipbooks, excerpts from written and phone correspondences, and reflections examining challenges in navigating the power dynamics between Kriss and Amber will form a multimedia installation.

This is the second edition of *Abolition Film Society*. In the first edition, Kriss distributed short films to five incarcerated

participants within the limitation of the prison system: stills sent by mail, audio played on the phone, and low-quality video clips transmitted via online communication platforms.

This booklet includes edited excerpts of phone transcripts and online messages between Amber and Kriss, organized by theme. We chose selections that directly informed the final short film and flipbooks, which are a fraction of our correspondences throughout 2021.

Our reading group included the following texts:

BOOKS

Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation, Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California, Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Making Time: Art in Age of Mass Incarceration, Nicole Fleetwood

No Shortcuts: Organizing Power in the New Gilded Age, Jane McAlevey

ARTICLES

"Reformist Reforms vs. Abolitionist Reforms" poster, Critical Resistance

"Capitalism and Gay Identity," John D'Emilio

"Erick's Adams's Moral Panics," Kay Gabriel

"Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind," Rachel Kushner

"What is to Be Done," Vladimir Lenin

"Social Reform of Revolution?" Rosa Luxemburg

"Against a 'Humanizing' Prison Cinema," Brett Story

"(Un)seeing Like a Prison: Counter-visual Ethnography of the Carceral State," Judah Schept

Change

AMBER

The one big question I have is, *Why are so many activists so opposed to putting together a ten-year plan of fighting various smaller battles that then amount to a larger change once everything is in place?* Which is really what I'm thinking. I'm not talking about just going for low-hanging fruit, which only results in non-reforms. I'm talking about moving towards the ultimate goal in a tactical, structured fashion.

I find myself in a strange position of having a perspective that is too radical for "respectable mainstream politics" and at the same time not radical enough for most people with more revolutionary politics. I find myself constantly navigating this middle ground and having my understanding constantly challenged from both sides.

Washington State Prison System

AMBER

In Washington State, they didn't have the prison-building boom like they down had in California, but they definitely had some decided expansion. Rather than building a whole bunch of brand new prison complexes like they did in California, what Washington did was add more units to preexisting prisons. There are a couple of exceptions. Twin Rivers Unit is the new prison from the 1970s, but that still predates this building boom. Coyote Ridge was majorly expanded. Walla Walla was majorly expanded. Stafford Creek had major expansions. All of those prisons had between four to six brand new units built into them, new buildings, but they weren't brand new complexes on virgin ground.

In the late 1970s, early 1980s, there was a handoff. The Washington State prison system used to be under the Department of Health and Human Services. Then they created the Department of Corrections (DOC) in the late 1970s, early 1980s. That's when the Washington State prison system really got turned into what it looks like today.

It was '83 or '82 when the Sentencing Reform Act got enacted, which got rid of parole. They then have this chart of points based on previous convictions. It took a lot of power from judges having discretion in sentencing. It gave a lot of power to prosecutors. They could play the chart to give a specific charge to determine how much time a person would get, even before trial started.

KRISS

There's a political rhetoric that this approach is supposed to be progressive because it takes away racial biases of judges and juries, but the results are harmful. What else was happening in Washington during that time of the handoff and sentencing reforms?

AMBER

Washington State has a weird geopolitical dynamic with which party is located where in the state. You have the Cascade Mountains essentially dividing Washington State in half. On the western half of the state, it's almost exclusively Democrats with a few conservative holdouts. Then on the eastern half of the state, it's exactly the opposite. It's almost all Republican with a few liberal enclaves here and there. It makes for very schizophrenic voting when it comes to state legislation. You end up having these deeply entrenched Republicans and deeply entrenched Democrats that are of the Southern Democrat tradition, not the progressive Democrat tradition, for the most part.

This weird dynamic is going on here. The governor is pretty much universally elected Democrat because there's more population on the western half of the state, because that's Seattle and Tacoma, Bellingham. Whereas Yakima and Spokane are all the eastern half of the state really has. So the governor is pretty much always the Democrat, but your Senate and your House for state legislature is very split.

You end up seeing a lot of these cliché neoliberal things happen in the name of balancing the state budget. You know, the closing of mental health institutions that happened in the mid- to late-eighties happened in Washington State too. The only one we got left are Eastern State Hospital and Western

State Hospital. And that's it for mental health—institutionalized people in a mental health institution.

KRISS

Those closures also came out of the de-institutionalization movement, right? They had been fought for by people who were affected by the system at the time.

AMBER

Right. But what was supposed to happen is we were then supposed to have equivalent services built totally in the community, which didn't happen. They didn't fund it. They passed the bill for it to exist, but they didn't give it any money when it went through appropriation.

It's a very neoliberal answer. The Democrats get to claim they voted for this thing to improve the lives of their constituencies, and they can run on that when they go for reelection. At the same time, the Republicans get to say that they blocked this by not appropriating funds to it, because it's a waste of money. You end up having both sides getting to claim the win back home when nothing happened.

KRISS

There's the political maneuvering side of things, but I'm also curious about what was happening economically at the time. In the late seventies throughout the US, there was stagflation, which is perhaps what we're entering now...I'm curious about what was going on with the state budget and revenue sources and how those factors impacted these decisions.

AMBER

I don't have much knowledge of this beyond Boeing and Kaiser Aluminum kind of dragging the rest of the manufacturing sector through the 1970s recession, kicking and screaming. Beyond that, I'm really not sure. I remember a lot of talk about the Kaiser Union doing big things during that time period. I'm really trying to dredge my memory for random stories that old-timers have told me about that time period. I'm not coming up with much.

KRISS

Then, similar to California, the tech boom started happening with Microsoft.

AMBER

Yeah, Microsoft and Amazon are in Tacoma and Seattle. One thing to also keep in mind is that Washington State has a publicly run prison system. You have a very strong presence of this organization called Correctional Industries, which is a corporation that originated in New York and was founded by former prison guards. They get contracts with the prison in order to manufacture goods in the prison that is then sold back to the prison or to other state institutions, and they make everything from license plates to boxes to glasses to rolling desk chairs to uniforms, just all types of things.

For the most part, each prison in Washington State has a presence of Correctional Industries within it, which is essentially moving money from the public budget to these private-sector budgets by way of the paychecks of the people who work for them. That's been the way that they make money off the prison.

KRISS

I'm just looking up Correctional Industries now, and there are like 2,700 people who work for this company. I feel like maybe the explanatory link is not the highest, because it's a pretty small number of people. It's not to say they don't have a powerful interest in lobbying for an expanded carceral system, but it seems like a small part of it.

AMBER

Well, while it's a small part of it, it's also one of the strongest blocs of power within the Washington DOC. If you look at the power analysis of the Washington DOC, inmates would be a small consideration, the guards union would be a moderate consideration, the state legislature would be a strong consideration, and Correctional Industries would be a strong consideration. Public opinion would be a moderate consideration.

KRISS

Why is Correctional Industries a stronger contingent than the guards' union?

AMBER

It's essentially who is able to actually get things done. The guards' union has their hands tied behind their back in two different directions. There's the consideration that they're supposed to represent the guards, but they do a shitty ass job of it. On the other hand, any time there's something safety or security related, they don't really have much of a say in it.

On top of that, they are a subset of the Teamsters union. This comes with its own historical baggage, which is both a plus and minus for the guards union. Teamsters is a very large, strong organization, but the Teamsters are great for truckers. They're not great for prison guards. Teamsters doesn't actually care about prisons. They care about shipping and logistics. So it ends up being more of a moderate influence. They give consideration for things like the guards' days off, COVID considerations. They've actually had quite a presence with that when it comes to safety measures for correctional officers, and being able to have days off without burning up their sick leave if they're maxed out because of COVID. But when it comes to actually influencing how the prison is run, they don't do that much.

Correctional Industries has so much power because their vested interest is in how the prison is run. For example, they have a lot of say over the way that the time structure of lifers is treated. For the longest time they wanted to concentrate all lifers in the closed custody to work for Correctional Industries there. That's because if you're a lifer, you're there for hella long time, and you can become a highly skilled worker for them, and that's how their pay grade works. You come in as an unskilled worker and you're paid sixty cents an hour. As you go up through levels, and there are four levels, your pay raise goes up for each level. Level four is basically the same as a floor supervisor as an inmate.

KRISS

What enables Correctional Industries that level of control over the state of things?

AMBER

They leverage a combination of lobbying, media releases to basically determine the way that doing time looks like. They really leverage these things. If you look at Sustainable Prisons Project, if you Google them real quick, you'll see a whole bunch of positive press. It's all about green energy. About three-quarters of it is green-washing and all the positive press is giving them leverage or social capital, especially within the state legislature.

They have a very good understanding of where to push what button in order to make what they want happen. With COVID, they wanted all their workers to be in one unit so that they didn't have to deal with cohorting as much, and that's exactly what custody did. Normally, custody stands on the rock of *nobody gets to determine housing but us*—well, except for Correctional Industries.

KRISS

What's interesting is that it looks like they're not a profit-making company. They do make sales, but it's actually costing the public money to run this program.

AMBER

It doesn't make money but most of the people in it have a six-figure income. It's not about the company making money. It's about the individuals making money.

KRISS

I'm curious to know more about what is giving them this influence, given that the program is actually financially

unsuccessful. What are the paths to power that they are exercising?

AMBER

It's actually written into Washington State law that they are a service provided to inmates for job training. That's why we have Class Three gratuity jobs, which are forty-two cents an hour. We have Class Two gratuity jobs, which is Correctional Industries. We have Class Three jobs, which is work release.

KRISS

It's a private company profiting off the backs of inmates, but it's seen as a state service. It has an ambiguous status.

AMBER

They're offering job training to prisoners in the prison by giving us these jobs, where we actually don't get taught jack shit.

KRISS

I think I've heard of Correctional Industries before, a long time ago. There had been controversy around local private businesses in Washington State being upset about companies that hired prison labour, because those companies could unfairly undercut competition by paying below-market wages. That's why these companies are not selling things on the open market anymore: they only provide products to state entities. There's something interesting here, especially if they're as powerful as you say in determining how the prison operates. That could be a point for us to target in terms of organizing.

AMBER

Right, because Correctional Industries is the main group that doesn't want any prisons to shut down. They were pissed when Washington State Reformatory shut down, which just recently happened because the DOC's incarceration numbers have been dropping. Well, Correctional Industries was pissed about it because their printing presses were all there. Their woodworking was there. They had this huge vermiculture operation going on there that was making fertilizer and worm tea and all this wonderful organic stuff. And they had a couple other things there. They had their optometry there. All these different things that they were funneling money through. I think it's a more accurate way of putting it than saying they're making profit—they're funneling money through.

KRISS

If they're receiving state money, they're essentially like correctional officers, right? They're contracted by the state to perform services. When a prison closes, it's not a loss of workforce that's the problem. The prisoners are not workers to them. So what are prisoners in those situations?

AMBER

In this situation, the prisoners are a renewable resources. You know, the same way you manage your timber land, you manage your inmates.

Prisoners in Abolitionist Movements

KRISS

What would need to happen for prisons to be drastically reduced? What would need to happen for prisons to cease to exist?

AMBER

For prisons to cease to exist, they must be replaced with something else, which serves to address the question of criminal harm. I believe this will eventually take the shape of transformative-justice processes paired with trauma-informed treatment programs that use a combination settings. I think those will look like closed-campus settings, open-campus inpatient settings, and outpatient settings as appropriate for each given person and situation.

KRISS

To me, that vision of abolition feels too limited in scope. Abolition can't just be about *what to do with people who commit harm*. This still sees harm as something done by a few individuals in society. If we understand harmful actions not on an individual level, but rather something that results from an unjust and unequal society, then the solution can't happen on an individual level either. We have to change the entire society. We need to divest from prisons and police and invest those resources into community resources that keep everyone safe: secure housing, physical and mental healthcare, education, social spaces

where everyone has a sense of belonging, and more. There's an abolitionist initiative in Canada called *Choosing Real Safety* that precisely calls for this shift in collective resources away from punishment towards institutions that help people thrive.

I think many of us see this divest/invest model as a path towards abolition. A more immediate step towards this is that we need to erode the power bases that currently support prisons—especially the people whose jobs are in the carceral system. Those are currently the people lobbying for expanding or at least maintaining the prison system, because their livelihoods depend on them. With a jobs retraining program, we can weaken that support and more easily pass legislation that redirects the funding currently going into punishment towards life- and community-affirming initiatives.

AMBER

Yes, I agree with you that there are a ton of societal problems that lead a person to prison. It is super messed up that if a kid is from a poor, people of color neighborhood with lots of gang violence, then the adults around that kid expect the kid to go to prison at some point. So yes, all the basic human needs need to be available to everyone. Good food, clean water, safe shelter, safe well-resourced schools, proper medical/mental health care, strong community ties, etc.

Now, how do we go from the racist neoliberal capitalist patriarchal xenophobic society of engineered scarcity, in which we currently live, to people's needs being met? And how do we address the harms that are happening every day because of humans being forced to live in inhuman conditions? Society must be changed, and individuals need to be given the chance to reform. Otherwise I don't see how the world could become a better, more liberated place.

I'm in prison, I've been in here for fifteen years. So when it comes to how do we change society, I feel like I'm not qualified to answer that question. At the same time, because I've been in prison so long and have been doing the work to reform myself. I feel I am qualified to speak on how to get people who are in prison to grow while in here, and not cause further harm in the future upon release.

I think that most people, if given the opportunity to get out in a year or two if they do treatment versus staying isolated in prison, will step up and grow. But, under the current system, all a person has to do is keep breathing long enough to be released. They are given so little good time that losing it is a joke. A person sentenced to a nonviolent crime is often given a year, with 1/3 off, for "good time." That's only a difference of three months separating them from good behavior and bad behavior. A person with a violent crime is often given a decade with 1/10 off. That's the difference of one year between good and bad behavior. They don't care so they don't change. They just keep breathing long enough and they get out. There is no incentive to do better.

Then there are people like me who are sentenced to die in prison. There is no path for me to show I have changed and could be released. I'm considered disposable and have been thrown away. The treatment programs that short-timers disdain and ignore I've had to beg to get into, in order to do my personal work.

KRISS

I'm super interested in further pursuing this topic because I haven't really seen the role of prisoners discussed very much in conversations about the direction that abolitionist politics has taken over the last few years, which follows from Ruth Gilmore's idea that "abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions." So abolition is not

just about closing prisons, though it is that as well. The main focus is to change the kind of society where state violence like police and prisons are seen as the only way to address harm. i.e. shifting resources from punitive and violent institutions to life-affirming institutions that create real safety. Accomplishing this requires changing policies and government budgets as well as popular consciousness.

I see this as a concrete and realizable direction for abolitionist politics—to answer your earlier question about activists out there who are fighting smaller battles that add up to large structural changes.

At the same time, where do prisoners fit into this struggle? Specifically, I'm thinking about your comment that you don't know much about how to change society at large, but you do know a lot about how to survive and build power inside prison. I worry that thinking of approaching abolitionist organizing through these high-level policy and structural changes can undermine the agency of prisoners in this process. Prisoners become conceptualized as merely one node on the power map rather than central to this fight, and may end up acting primarily as symbols while so-called activists do the real work. I'll have to think more about how founded this concern is, and I'm curious to hear your perspective as well.

Nonetheless, I think there could be interesting ways center prisoners and prisoners' demands in this particular path towards abolition and I'm excited to brainstorm this with you.

AMBER

This makes me think about the holistic *whole-life* approach in labor organizing. You can't just look at any one factor that a worker or, in our case, incarcerated person is dealing with. There has to be consideration for education level, emotional maturity,

addiction issues, level of self-regulation/impulse control, level of family/community support, trauma and other damage, gang affiliation, membership in positive community organizations, and so on. A whole host that reflects the combination of societal and personal factors we've debated a few times now.

Instead, when we talk about incarcerated people, they often get reduced to their crime, their time, and maybe one or two "respectable/employable" skills. There is no way to meet a person's needs if that is all we are talking about.

This is why I disagree with Critical Resistance that expanding education and classroom spaces in prison should be considered a "reformist reform" rather than "abolitionist reform"—instead of being considered as a part of building prisoner agency and power. Which leads to your other question. *Where do prisoners fit in with all these abolitionists fighting to close prisons without actually talking to or taking direction from prisoners?*

We are used as a talisman, which confers the ability to speak authoritatively about abolition or prison reform without actually consulting prisoners about it. To abolitionists or prison-reform and sentencing-reform groups, prisoners are mascots. Held front and center to be cheered and jeered, but not to be taken seriously as soon as the "adults" are talking about what needs to be done.

Some of our quaint thoughts may be quoted and recontextualized for the purpose of supporting whatever position has been previously arrived at without us, but they cherry-pick what they like and toss the rest as being uneducated or false consciousness.

Granted, sometimes the prisoners are just wrong. Last year the Washington Department of Corrections closed Washington State Reformatory, a prison I did time at in Monroe. A lot of prisoners in that prison didn't want it to close because there was a subculture there—which existed parallel to the normal prison culture—of education and self-improvement. As long as

one stayed within this subculture, doing time there was good. Prisoners didn't want that destroyed, so they argued against closing the prison. Which was wrong. Close the damn prison, and create similar opportunities for education in other facilities. Then similar subcultures can develop in those prisons, which in turn give rise to incarcerated people who can be leaders in the abolitionist struggle instead of mascots.

KRISS

Some abolitionists talk about the prison as an institution that extracts prisoners' time, which then gets transformed into money. In this case, arts and educational programs are seen as another avenue to turn prisoners' time into money for the Department of Corrections.

Having said this, I definitely also take very seriously your intervention that education and arts programming drastically improve prisoners' quality of life and post-release opportunities. I wonder if it's really a matter of fighting for programming that takes a different form—one that contributes to decarceration rather than funneling more money towards corrections. What could that look like? All of this points to a central contradiction of the current abolition-as-defund movement: any move to defund the prison system, in the short term, can worsen the lives of prisoners. So how does this shape our demands and strategies?

AMBER

For prisoners to have a greater voice about the direction of abolitionist struggle, the minimum we need is a room to sit down in and have conversation with an outside facilitator who can bring in materials for education and discussion. That

means funding the creation of classroom spaces in prison. What that specifically looks like varies by prison, based on what is already there.

At Walla Walla they need a new classroom building for medium and closed custody, because currently these two custody levels are sharing five classrooms between both of them. In Twin Rivers Unit, this means installing proper ventilation and air-conditioning in the preexisting classroom building. They have, in one building, three classrooms that are currently used, then four other classrooms that cannot be used because they get to be over 95°F/35°C in the summer and they have toxically high CO2 buildup in the winter.

I understand that if a divest/invest approach was successful, conditions of confinement could get worse. Staff shortages and supply shortages due to lack of funding make things worse for incarcerated people in the short term. However, if there is to be leadership from incarcerated people, then a part of that investment must include classrooms for prisoners to meet and learn and build community. I'm assuming abolitionist volunteers could be the people coming in to facilitate those conversations and bring in materials.

If this could be expanded to Associate Degree programs, so much the better. I think where the disconnect is happening between the "official" abolitionist position and what I am saying is that abolitionists are focused on making it so people are released or don't go to prison in the first place. And that is good. But there is no focus on keeping people from coming back to prison. I think the best way to do this would be to have as many incarcerated people as possible to become a part of abolitionist work upon their release.

A top-down approach is a lot of what has been happening. Within a diagram of power, prisoners are this one little tiny dot, then you have these big circles of interest groups and political

offices and such, when the prisoners outnumber every single person in those other nodes by like twelve to one. It becomes an ant and grasshopper situation and the ants don't have the ability to do anything about the grasshoppers because the system is designed to prevent us from doing so.

You end up having social groups like the Black Prisoners' Caucus and Concerned Lifers' Organization here in Washington, which are prisoner-run. Then there are outside sponsors who come in and the only power leverage that exists for these prisoner-run groups is that they've developed legitimacy over time, because they've existed for so long.

Then you start having senators and such coming into these groups, sitting down and having conversations with prisoners about what's actually going on in the prison. That's where prisoners' power happens, a little bit. But we're only getting the state senators who already support prisoner reform to come in. They're partly coming in so that they can then go out to their constituency and say, *I have a plan for reforming prisons and I talked to the prisoners about it.*

Allies & Power

AMBER

I see most people as potential allies. There are really only a few political positions that I see as deal-breakers that make it so I cannot work with someone.

The first I think of as *belief in hierarchy*. This covers a multitude of sins that include an active support/belief in racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. It also covers organization strategy. I believe that the position of a leader is to serve, not to wield power or act as a gatekeeper from whom permission must be sought.

Specifically, I remember the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) as being just the worst anytime any group that I was in tried to work with them. First, as a part of the Black Prisoners Caucus, an anti-racist organization in the Monroe prison, they kept trying to take over whatever work was being done, acted in an extremely paternalistic way, and refused to acknowledge that their position of Life Without Parole being an okay alternative to death penalty was absolutely terrible and was causing many people in the room to be stuck in prison for the rest of their lives.

Then later, in the Coalition for Trans Prisoners, a now-defunct trans advocacy group in Washington, they again wanted to take over and kept pushing for strategies that would give them free press, but in no way actually moved towards helping incarcerated trans people. In both cases the organization cut ties because, as well meaning as they were, the ACLU had zero ability to work well with others.

The second deal-breaker for me is *belief in imposing*. People can be invited to come along, but they cannot be forced.

The reality is I don't actually put much stock in political allies because it is usually a goal driven relationship that does not last very long. I much prefer to be a political co-conspirator working for each other's liberation. This is a long-term relationship that involves getting to know each other in a much more meaningful way.

KRISS

I'd like to talk a bit more about your comment that you put more stock in co-conspirators than allies. I totally get that—I definitely put much more energy into people who are comrades in long-term struggles who I can get to know as people. I think community building is super important.

However, I would like to question the inclination to devalue short-term alliances that are based on accomplishing specific goals. I mean, how many people can we actually get to know in long-term, meaningful ways? Realistically, maybe a few dozen, maybe a few hundred at most. If the changes I wanted to see happen could only be achieved with people I have long-term, meaningful relationships with, I'd be in trouble. That just isn't enough people power to combat the elite with their access to money, favorable laws, influence on media, and so on. Or to challenge the inertia of institutions that are used to doing things in harmful ways.

I think it's important to align ourselves with people on short-term projects that accomplish specific goals, even if those aren't people who we agree with on all the things and even if they aren't people we like hanging out with otherwise. To me, those kinds of relationships are absolutely crucial for building the movements required to make the changes I want to see. We just

have to be clear about which changes are critical to create the worlds we want.

So, for example, shutting down the construction of new prisons is a concrete way to combat the expansion of the carceral system. We need support from lots of people to make this happen. Some of those people might be coming onboard because they think having prisoners and prisoners' families in their neighborhood will lower their property value. Do I care about their property value? No. But I do think that there could be ways to leverage their interests towards achieving the goal of shutting down a new prison. If successful, that win would have concrete, positive effects. We just need to be vigilant about ensuring that our abolitionist values, rather than concerns about property value, end up driving the agenda of the entire campaign. This isn't an easy task, but I think it's necessary to approach political alliances in diverse ways in order to win.

I found it very interesting to hear about your experience with ACLU. They sound very frustrating to work with! To me, though, that just tells me that we need to enter certain alliances with caution and intention, and to make sure that we have the power to set the agenda and that we don't get co-opted towards a goal we don't share.

Given your experiences, I can see why you might make the decision against working with them in contexts where the power dynamic is disproportionately in their favor, which seems like the experiences you've had. But I don't think those bad experiences necessitates never working with them again, even in contexts where the power dynamic is actually in your favor. If they do have resources that you want to leverage, then the question becomes how to maintain a power dynamic where they aren't driving the agenda—even if that's what they want to do. You need a strategy that doesn't rely on ACLU coming in with good will, if that makes sense.

If the power dynamic is so entrenched in their favor to be completely unchangeable, then I think you'd make the right call to avoid working with them. But I also wonder if there are creative strategies to keep them accountable, and maybe you have access to resources in your favor that you wouldn't have considered if you just made the call to never work with them again.

AMBER

As you said, the disproportionate power dynamic is really hard to deal with, and when allies aren't acting in good faith, that makes things that much more difficult. So, at this point, my conclusion is it is necessary to have a few co-conspirators before branching out and seeking allyship. It levels the playing field and allows for reaching out to potential allies who one could not consider otherwise.

There are specific organizations (like the ACLU) who I will only work with if what I'm working towards fits their selfish agenda, then break off the alliance as soon as possible before they can try to take over or bollocks things up. There are other allies (like Left Bank Books) who I'm happy to work with long-term, but they never become co-conspirators because they are not willing to invest in the relationship. They stick to their one thing—sending books to prisoners—and don't really talk to prisoners much. They refuse to think about the bigger picture and what they can do, like challenging prison censorship, even though they are in a perfect position to do so.

It is really hard to have a coalition that is prisoner-led, unless there are some outside co-conspirators who will strongly argue on the prisoners' behalf with ally organizations. I've seen it time and again. Prisoners end up being more of a mascot than leadership because their arguments, critiques, and needs get swept aside by the agendas of ally organizations.

KRISS

I've been thinking about what I wrote to you in terms of this relationship with ACLU. I find myself wondering if my intervention betrays a level of naïveté about just how little power prisoners have in comparison to a group like ACLU. Is it a situation where the power is so entrenched against you that you just have no possible leverage at all? I know that there is a huge disparity of power, of course, and I should have acknowledged that more openly. Not acknowledging it can feel like I'm blaming you for not being "creative" enough to find a way to drive the agenda during an interaction with ACLU, without recognizing all the barriers in place for you to do that.

But, nonetheless—even given the massive disparity, is the only hope for benefiting from interacting with ACLU is for them to somehow have a change of heart? Or is there another path in this situation, one that builds power for prisoners? Don't hesitate to call me out if you feel that I've missed something really important.

AMBER

I think you did a perfect job of calling yourself out on it. Yes, the power disparity is huge. Not just between prisoners and the ACLU, but between prisoners and any outside organization. The ACLU is just particularly terrible. The usual way that prisoner-led organizations in the prison deal with this is start from mutual self-interest. Basically, are the things this outside organization is already doing in our self-interest, and what does that organization gain from working with us? If nothing else, one can always count on people acting in their own self-interest and/or continuing their current pattern of behavior.

It's super messed up, because so many outside organizations have taken advantage of (and gotten grants off of)

the “legitimacy” that comes from working with prisoner organizations, it’s where the conversation starts. As time moves forward, a given group or individual shifts from being an ally to a co-conspirator. Then the “creative” solution for dealing with organizations like the ACLU, who act in bad faith, is to then have one’s co-conspirators keep them honest.

But that is still a dependent relationship. Prisoners aren’t exercising power in that situation. We are having others exercise their power on our behalf. There is an institutionally engineered lack of power for prisoners. Take my writing for example. I can get published in “for prisoners” newsletters all day long, but to be published anywhere else, I have to rely on others to act on my behalf to get it done. I can’t just email my manuscript to a publisher. My voice is muzzled by the fact of incarceration.

Food

AMBER

Right now I'm a little pooped because I just got off work about half hour, forty-five minutes ago. Currently we're working 5:30 to 1:30, because Close Custody Unite has been on quarantine. Somebody was telling me that they just got off quarantine today. If so that'll be nice. I'm hoping that's true, because then I'm gonna be working 9AM to 1:30. And that's such a better schedule.

KRISS

I can't imagine getting up at 5:30 to go to the kitchen.

AMBER

I'm actually getting up at fricking 4:45 to get ready, and I am not a morning person. Then they have me assigned to do the diets, which sucks. You have your religious diets, halal, kosher, vegan. Then you have all your medical diets, your no peanuts, your fish allergies, your no tomatoes, your gluten-free, low-oxalate renal, consistent carb, all these different medical diets. So I'm actually cooking food for about fifty people or so, but all of them have different requirements. That's a lot. I've got eight koshers that I have to make. I've got five halals that I've got to make. I've got eight vegans and then I've got five gluten-frees and I've got six no peanuts and two tomato allergies. It adds up like that, all of this little bullshit.

We get these big plastic tubes and they're two or three gallons worth of stuff—plastic bladders of stuff. When we first get them

they're frozen. We take between six to eight of these, depending on what meal we're making, and we put them into boiling water so that they heat up. Then we pull them out of the boiling water and each of these big plastic bladders gets into a pan that's four inches deep by nine inches wide by two feet long. And each bladder fills up one of those pans, for the most part.

The AC cook has to come by with a knife to cut it open and it just kind of splooges out of the thing, and this is like all of our different meals that come as a meat sauce mystery whatever. There's the chicken teriyaki right, it's just this brownish gravy type substance and these little tiny bits of chicken throughout that are very small shredded. It's the waste parts of the chicken in it, then bits of pineapple and some veggies like carrots and potatoes and it's kind of gross.

For breakfast we have these big fifty pounds of dry, nefarious grains. There's oats and there's cured barley. You can make a gruel from barley but it has to be baked first, apparently. It was baked before it was put in the bag and shipped to us, so you have the oats and you have the barley and we have this big pot that probably holds fifty to seventy-five gallons worth of water. We pour the grains into that and we actually make it in what's called a steam kettle that's heated up by steam. You fill it up with water and it looks like a giant kettle and you make it in that, then you have to scoop it out with a one gallon metal pitcher. You put it into pans then it gets served. And it's just this weird icky mush stuff.

There have been times where it's been six months or a year straight where I've had ramen every single day. I think it's been probably three years that I've had ramen every day without interruption.

KRISS

What does the ramen that you eat look like? What's the flavour?
What brand?

AMBER

I should totally send you a canteen sheet. The prices are getting ridiculous because of the war in Ukraine and oil prices and all the other things. Our canteen prices have gone up between a buck to three bucks on literally everything in the last six months. But yeah, it's just like...have you ever been to a Costco or a Sam's Club or something like that? You know how they sell ramen in the flats of twenty-four? That's how I buy it. It's seven bucks for a flat of twenty-four and I usually get the low sodium beef. There's creamy chicken. There's shrimp, there's spicy vegetable, and there's Texas beef.

KRISS

The canteen is not the same as where I ordered stuff from one time, right?

AMBER

Right. If you order a food package for me, that's through Union Supply, which is a totally different beast. Canteen is through Correctional Industries. Correctional Industries buys all this stuff in bulk, puts it in some warehouse. We order it, then we get it, and it's all Correctional Industries still. So you literally have people who get Correctional Industries jobs to buy Correctional Industries food off the Correctional Industries canteen. It's like, *Where did that money go?*

KRISS

You've mentioned making ramen with meat and other things.

AMBER

Yeah, we also buy from the store little bars of cheese and it's actually decent cheese. Chunks of cheese and meat and other goodies added to the basic ramen soup.

Solidarity & Prejudice

AMBER

There are people who vote against jails on the legislative branch positions, then vote tough on crime on the executive branch position of mayor. I think this shows the reality that most people don't care how a problem gets fixed. They only care that it gets fixed.

Both anti-carceral and tough-on-crime positions are identifying the same problem in need of fixing: community safety. However, they are proposing two very different visions of how to go about fixing it. I don't think most people actually think deeply enough to look into the how. Here's a person promising to fix the problem, so they get voted for.

Of course all the layers of indoctrination and inculturation play a part as well, even and especially when a person is voting against their self-interest. Rather than dismissing this as "false consciousness," I think it is important to instead look at how the people affected articulate the problem to themselves for themselves. These issues could then be reflected back to the populace and framed in the context of *police, who aren't working, are getting paid with money that could fix this, and fixing this would make your life safer/better.*

I don't think false consciousness is as much of a thing as it is often touted as. I think it is an excuse to dismiss the very real issues a group of people are suffering under because fixing them does not conveniently fit in the pre-fab box of one's critique.

KRISS

I'm interested in the way you talk about how people just want to be safe and they don't care how they get there. I agree with you. There's a generosity in that idea, which is lacking certain leftists spaces that see anyone who votes in favor of policing as simply white supremacist. Yes, sometimes people vote for more police because they're racist, but there's also often an underlying desire for safety and security. I see this as a more hopeful and generous way of thinking about a world that is nonetheless pretty awful. For anyone to believe in mass movements, you have to believe that there's an underlying shared interest among a lot of different people.

AMBER

I have this working assumption about how life works. I generally assume people are not actually out to get anyone unless it's proven that there's malicious intent there. I assume people don't care. They're too caught up in their own stuff to be invested enough in somebody else's stuff to be out to get them. But it's amazing how much harm can be caused when a person has no intentions at all. So often somebody gets hurt and then the other person who did it is like, *But I didn't mean to hurt you*. Right, but you didn't mean to anything at all. I think about that a lot, and how it plays out on the societal level.

So sure, you could call these things out as being racist and then be done with your critique, but that's then missing out on this really important piece. It's not that these people hate Black people or hate trans people or hate API people or whatever. It's that they just don't care, because they have their own issues.

KRISS

It goes beyond not caring. Society structures us to have certain kinds of relationships with each other, which is not determinant but it influences how we relate to each other. There is a lack of intentionality, as you're saying, which is hopeful because you can change it...

AMBER

It's so much easier to shift people from not caring to at least giving thought to it than it is to go from active hatred to at least being ambivalent. I feel like those are two different lenses, two really different approaches.

KRISS

Even going from different modes of not caring can be useful—going from having to take someone down to get your needs met versus not having to do that. That's the structure changing.

Stacking

AMBER

My best friend is over on the B Pod, but I see her in the window when I go out the yard. There's a variant of sign language called stacking that we can use to talk to each other. We've been checking in with each other each day.

KRISS

You communicate from a distance by sign?

AMBER

Yeah.

KRISS

Wow, that blows my mind.

AMBER

It's a variant of sign language—fingerspelling within sign language. Every single letter has a hand sign. In prison, there's a variation of that called stacking, where some of the letters are changed so they can be easily seen from a distance. In sign language, the letters S, T, N, and M basically look identical from twenty feet away, so all of those letters are changed to something else. That way, you can see them from a distance. We can literally be a football field away and talk.

KRISS

You spell out everything. Wow, that's slow.

AMBER

Bit of a struggle for me because of the dyslexia, but once you get good at it, you can actually go pretty quick.

KRISS

How did you learn?

AMBER

I learned it because I've been in prison for fifteen years, and I picked it up in the men's prisons. Especially when you're in Intensive Management Unit or closed custody, there are lots of cases where you can see somebody you know, but you can't talk to them because there's plexiglass in the way or you're really far from each other. Then you use stacking. I learned it from there and I taught it to my best friend in the women's prison. I was like, *Look, you've got like a decade to go. This is one of those prison skills you just need to know.* When I first introduced it to her, she was like, *No, I don't need to know that.* Then two weeks later we had a lockdown and she was like *Okay, I'll learn it.*

KRISS

Did you just pick it up or were you taught by someone?

AMBER

You kind of have to be. I already knew ASL fingerspelling because I knew a little bit of sign language, literally just enough

to get myself in trouble. But I mean, over the course of fifteen years, you kind of have to know it, especially considering eight of those years being in closed custody.

When I taught my best friend, I went over all the alphabet with her twice. We spent a couple hours sitting at a table, just practicing, back and forth. At this point, she's honestly gotten better at it than me.

Making a Film

AMBER

I've found that any time you're doing some artsy stuff, it's always better if you aren't going directly at it. You have to come at it like a spiral. We're doing that. We're circling the something and we're gonna get there eventually. But if we look at it directly, it's gonna disappear on us.

KRISS

I keep thinking about landscape. We've also had lots of conversations about different kinds of industry that you know so much about.

AMBER

We definitely have a few concepts that we've gone over. We've gone over prison labor. We've talked about education. We've talked about the debate of what is still considered to be investing in prisons versus investing in the people who are in prisons.

KRISS

And power.

AMBER

We've had conversations about power dynamics. We've had conversations about the way that people on the outside try to

do good things for people on the inside and completely missing the boat on those power dynamics. We've had all these different conversations, and which one do we wanna land on? How do we go about that?

KRISS

Something that stood out to me is that there's some tension in our conversations. Ultimately we think very similarly, but a lot of the ways I'm looking at things is through the perspective of structures and institutions and actions on these larger scales. Whereas you keep bringing it back to an individual prisoner's experience. In our conversations, there are questions of individual and harm and reform that become places where we have friction, which I find interesting.

AMBER

We've been having this really interesting discussion about three tensions. You got the tension of all the fucked up societal shit that causes the person to go to prison. Then you have the tension of a person in prison, what do they do with that time? That ends up being a fate-versus-free-will pull. The society that you're born into and don't have control over, that's fate. The free-will side of it becomes questions of what prisoners do with their time once they're inside. Do they just sit around playing cards, gamble, watch TV, do nothing with their lives, and just keep breathing until their release date or until they die, whichever comes first? Or do they get into education, arts, things that make you a more human person? Those are pulling on each other. Then you have this other side of the abolitionist movement. How do you channel all this idle energy of people in prison towards prison abolition? That's our three-way pull, right? I see myself

as being...You put the education out there, you make the option for people to release into abolitionist support groups. Then you have people coming out of prison being supported and what that person knows about incarceration is being used by the movement. It comes back to education and classroom.

KRISS

A lot of people I know from my experience at Prisoner Correspondence Project don't have the educational background that you had coming in, so the kinds of materials that you've been able to read and write about, a lot of people don't have the basis to do that kind of work.

AMBER

That's kind of what I'm thinking of. How do you present that idea?

KRISS

Another thing is I'm really obsessed with this stacking that you talked about last time. I feel like we could even incorporate that as a way of adding text to the piece.

AMBER

We could totally do a video visit where I stake the alphabet to you a couple of times, so you have it on camera. Then you can use that as reference material for the people on the screen and subtitle what's being stacked.

KRISS

That would be amazing. It could be a conversation. We could

have a conversation. Not necessarily a conversation between two people...it could even be subtitle or subheading, if we had multiple sections. That would be awesome.

AMBER

Or even having a person in the corner stacking whatever the message is. You know, the way you have an ASL interpreter in the corner of the screen when the politician's talking.

KRISS

You know what would be cool, now that we're talking—I hadn't thought of breaking up the panels—we could even do a split screen the whole time and just split the screen in half. I think the flipbooks are going to be pretty small to be flippable so I don't think anything smaller than half a screen will be visible. But we could then pair text with image and the image could be fairly abstract, but that's still a way of getting messages across.

AMBER

Then the person stacking on the other side with a subtitle gives the context for the abstract image.

KRISS

I love this idea because it needs to be a silent film in order to become flipbooks and it makes so much sense in that context.

AMBER

And the prison audience will get it. Then the free world audience will be like, what is that?

KRISS

Our conversations have touched on a lot. We talked about Correctional Industries—you had this one visual that I loved, of the prisoners as lumber, so we could have a phrase about managing the population and just have footage of lumber. That could be a bit abstract. There could be an accompanying booklet that has snippets of our conversations. Something else that's come up in the conversations is when you were talking about all the different ways that prisoners are conceptualized. You were talking about the prisoner being a banner for the abolition movement. Or like lumber. I guess those were the two, but if there were more...then it's almost a first-person piece about all the different ways that a prisoner is conceptualized. It could be one person doing the stacking, who's a bit of an anonymous prisoner but then all the different scales this person exists on.

AMBER

Oooh. I just got the image in my head. You have a pair of hands, and the person is intentionally wearing long sleeved, bright hunter's orange shirt. You can see the sleeve cuffs of the bright orange shirt with the hand. And the person's stacking something like, *The ways I am seen is shifted by who sees me*. Then it talks about as a resource, as *profit margin*, as a banner, and it's just as a, as a. It's talking about all these different ways that prisoners are either used, exploited, seen, or oppressed.

KRISS

I like that. I'm imaging the phrase that's just *I am*. I don't know if you like that. It feels aesthetically pleasing to me just being like, *I am a body*. So that's one. I am these personal things, then also *I am a resource*...but I don't know if we want this person to self-identify as a resource. But maybe it's not self-identifying.

AMBER

I think the first-person voice gives it a punch in the gut, right? *I am a target...*

KRISS

I like that, *I am a target*. I'm drawn to the idea of tracing one thing across multiple scales: social, spatial, emotional, physical. It could even be like, *I am moving to a different pod today*. It could be different levels of operation.

AMBER

So you have the metaphorical systemic stuff then you have the slice of life stuff. Yeah, I like it.

KRISS

Because our conversations were like that, right? We could even take all the topics we talked about and think about how to translate them into phrases, so then it becomes a kind of documentary of the conversations we've had, and that's exciting to me.

AMBER

I like your idea of interposing different levels of *I am* statements. So like, *I am soon to be strip searched*, then like, *I am going to the yard to relax*. *I am going to get an education*. *I am going to the hole*. Each of these seems to create a contradiction, but they are all just totally normal prisoner experiences.

KRISS

Then maybe interjected with more abstract statements. I keep bringing it up, but I really love the one that you had that's something like, *I am to Correctional Industries what lumber is to forest industry* or whatever. Something like that but better composed.

AMBER

What lumber is to housebuilding.

KRISS

I'm thinking of images. I like those daily experiences—maybe not *get an education* but like, *I am reading this book*. We can be as concrete as possible.

AMBER

I am job security for correctional officers.

KRISS

I like that. What if it was a particular correctional officer? Or you can name a bunch of them.

AMBER

The name that pops into my head is CO Robert. He is the literal worst.

Reflections

KRISS

One topic that I'm really interested in talking more about is the fraught nature of working with people in prison. I'm proud of the way the film turned out and I'm sure the flipbooks will be beautiful but I'm not sure that I would work on the project quite in this way again.

I wonder about what kind of collaboration is possible when there is such disparity in power and access to resources. I also receive benefits from this project that you aren't able to receive, like living in New Orleans for a month and gaining institutional recognition that advances my career. I think there's always tension regarding power imbalance and potential for extraction that never goes away in a relationship like this. I don't think that tension is inherently bad, though perhaps approaching a project like a collaboration doesn't actually capture the inevitable unease of the process.

Another factor is that as an artist, I have strong opinions about what makes good art and I want things to look and feel a certain way. I think that's okay, but in that case I need to own my desire to control the process in order to achieve certain aesthetic results, if that makes sense? I think it's important to be transparent about how much control I have (and want!) over this project because of my commitment to a particular artistic vision that I honestly don't want to surrender. Having said this, I think the process has been collaborative. That phone call where we came up with the structure for the film really felt like magic. I spent multiple days with zero ideas then it all came into form

during our conversation together, and we both contributed to the structure of the film.

But ultimately I have (and want!) final say over how things come together creatively. Again, I don't think that's bad, but I need to be open about it from the start. In this case, I may not have been totally honest with myself about how important artistic control is to me.

I do think it's awesome that I'm able to pay you a lot of money—which we still need to figure out in terms of banking!—but I wonder if a project that pays prisoners as workers performing specific jobs would be more honest. Or a project built more around passing on specific skills for you to create your own work.

Or there's the setup where I play a supporting role in your project that you have control over, which I merely help facilitate. I'm definitely interested in thinking more about that in terms of a potential book for you, if that's something you want to work on. I'm not a writer but could potentially help find people to support something like that.

I'm also thinking about Prisoner Correspondence Project, which is partly a project that plays a supporting role but it also has its own political vision. While the project does take feedback from the inside membership, we're also committed to our own mission and don't always follow the lead of the inside membership—for example, most of our inside members are not abolitionists. That could be an interesting framework for thinking about how to make art collaboratively, but I'm not sure how it applies just yet.

AMBER

I actually really like and appreciate and love a lot of the points you made, especially around that dynamic of your personal

issues around control that's then exasperated by, or I guess in cahoots with, the power dynamic, right?

I really loved the way you named that. I think that's cool of you to recognize that it's not just a systemic issue; it's also an interpersonal issue of how we address it. I do think that between the two of us, we did a really good job of recognizing that and working through that and not letting that be the full stop, you know what I mean? Not letting it be turned into a *I'm working for you* situation — it's a *I'm working with you* situation.

So...where we were talking about that phone call where it's like, you know, nothing seemed to be coming together. Then we had that one phone call where we just stitched it together and we suddenly had a really nice container for what we were doing. We were just scribbling over details after that point. I think this was a really important moment, but the moment would not have happened without our previous phone calls, our previous letter exchanges. It's almost like that moment when you're building a barn, right? Have you ever been part of a barn raising?

KRISS

I have not been part of a barn raising, no.

AMBER

It's like everything up to this particular point feels like you've done nothing. You dig the foundation out, you put the concrete down, it feels like you've done nothing. You frame out the walls and they're all lying on the ground and it feels like you've done nothing.

You start putting all the slabs, all the walls that are on the ground, and it still feels like you've done nothing. And then there's this magical moment where you set up a couple

of frames for pulling the walls up so you can actually nail the walls together and it's like, Sure, the roof isn't on it yet, but we have a barn now. It's this magic click moment that only happens because of all this other work that happened beforehand.

KRISS

I know that I do have a very particular artistic vision and like I said, I don't think it's bad, but it's something that would be good to acknowledge and recognize and build around from the start. But then I was listening to the recording of our calls and I was like, *No, actually we did come up with this film together.* It was one after another, very back and forth. In my mind I was being more controlling of the process than I actually was, upon listening to the conversation again.

AMBER

Honestly, the only part of the process that you really super control is the actual filming itself, because I literally can't be there. That is your own little private personal space for you to do what you gotta do. I have nothing to say about that, you know? It is what it's going to be and I'm still hoping we can figure out a way to send those videos to me when they're done. I'm really looking forward to seeing them, you know?

KRISS

Still, I'm the one who gets to present this project a certain way. I'm still thinking about what that means for the future and it's an open question.