

The Prison Abolitionist Imagination:
A Conversation

[An outstretched hand offers you a wisp of hair]
and yet, I cannot give you what outruns us both:
this text
which you will lose, as all are lost

This I know: what I cannot lay claim to
[the joy of a power
that rises and returns,
which no one owns,
*because it cannot be appropriated]*¹

I will these words be with you
as a connective tissue
conjoining [us]:
unassailable creatures
endlessly in process
searching for the tiny miracle
of encountering each other here ...

*

The late Mark Fisher once famously said that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. The same could be said about prisons: it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine a world without prisons. And yet the modern prison as it currently exists in the United States is a fairly recent invention. Although penological debates about competing systems of punishment and rehabilitation raged in the North in the early nineteenth century, by the end of the Civil War, physical penitentiaries were uncommon in some frontier states. Florida—which now has one of the largest prison systems in the U.S.—had no *physical* penitentiaries at the end of the Civil War and had to create its penal system from scratch.

Yet at this historical juncture prisons have become thoroughly naturalized. Imagining and working toward a world without prisons—which is the project of prison abolition—would not only require us to fundamentally rethink the role of the state in society, but it would also require us to work toward the total transformation of all social relations. A project as lofty and ambitious as this is easy to dismiss as unrealistic, utopian, impractical, naive—*an unrealizable dream*. But what if—instead of reacting to these charges with counter-arguments that persuasively demonstrate that the abolitionist position is the only sensible position—

we instead strategically use these charges themselves as a point of departure to show how the prison itself is a problem for thought that can only be unthought using *a mode of thinking that does not capitulate to the realism of the Present*? Can the re-enchantment of the world be an instrument that we use to shatter the realism of the prison?

What follows is a series of questions—conversations with revolutionaries, dead and alive, on death, dreams, the struggle, and the phenomenological experience of freedom.

There are moments I want to enter. Will you follow me there, to the place where the breathing walls quietly exhale a low freedom song?

*

Inside a dark cell, the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg retreats into her mind. Outside, World War I is raging. “We’re in a tomb.” Outside, people are creating memories. Inside, she relives old ones. While everyone sleeps, she incubates a secret—journeys to the place where the mystery is audible. As a guard stands watch over the night, she sees beyond the walls into a flowering meadow she once knew, or only knew, in a dream. From where does this small song emanate? If only ...

If only we knew how to listen properly,
and to brandish our incandescence
to the lie that is a lock.

A DOZEN ROSES VS. THE POLICE STATE

In the hours after [Mike] Brown's body was finally moved, residents erected a makeshift memorial of teddy bears and memorabilia on the spot where police had left his body. When the police arrived with a canine unit, one officer let a dog urinate on the memorial. Later, when Brown's mother, Lesley McSpadden, laid out rose petals in the form of his initials, a police cruiser whizzed by, crushing the memorial and scattering the flowers. The next evening, McSpadden and other friends and family went back to the memorial site and laid down a dozen roses. Again, a police cruiser came through and destroyed the flowers. Later that night, the uprising began.

—Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*²

I think about how the people gathered after Mike Brown was killed—how they made a makeshift memorial on the bloodstained spot in the road where he had been murdered by the police state. What do I see in this encounter? The will of the people butting up against the police's desire to destroy—to crush all public expressions of grief. The police's show of force is unnecessary, compensatory. They want us to believe that police cars will always crush rose petals. They tell themselves that their uniform and the power that backs it makes them invulnerable—not like the rose petals arranged in

the shape of MB. They tried to erase the name “Mike Brown,” but it will forever be seared into the minds of the people of Ferguson. Erase the memorials, erase the flowers—the people will still rise up.

That night, an uprising bloomed out of the ground where the memorial flowers had been crushed.

*

I once read an article about the dreams of dying people. There was a former cop who couldn’t stop having nightmares about the people he had violated. He told a hospice nurse that on the job he had “done bad stuff.” Tormented by his dreams, he gets “stabbed, shot, or can’t breathe.”³

Eric Garner’s last “I can’t breathe” circles in time to haunt the officers who take the air out of the world. The cop died with so much regret.

The conscious mind of the police officer may be sure of its correctness,
but the unconscious mind knows it has done terrible things.

The trampling of the memorial flowers is an act of repression.

But whatever you try to blot out and refuse to integrate

returns with greater vigor.

If I ever met the officers, I would tell them:

Before you die you will encounter
the lives you took and violated.
You, driving around in your
steel-enclosed fantasy of invincibility.
You who must desecrate memorials
to prove to yourself you are strong—
to hide this weakness of imagination:
a police cruiser scattering rose petals.

What was it you tried to crush there—
was it a way to blot out awareness
of your own death?

And yet every time you tried to destroy the memorial
the people returned, with objects that bore
the memory of Mike Brown.
You tried to force the people of Ferguson to forget.
The people returned
with a will to carry
the memory into the streets.

*

Yesterday I saw a tweet that said: *Remember: We lost
in Ferguson. We lost in Standing Rock.*

Over and over again, the ecstatic moment of
revolt was met with repression even greater than
what we had anticipated.

The fissure was not a place where we could live.
We could not hold on to the new social forms we
invented in the process of revolt. The establishment

leaders were sent to neutralize the protesters. We were told to go home. We failed to make the revolution our permanent home.

But the spark is kept alive,
underground, waiting for the right conditions.

The specter of Attica
The specter of Wounded Knee
The specter of Ferguson
The specter of Harpers Ferry
The specter of Haiti

THE PRISON IS OUR SHADOW

Neither a prisoner nor a free man, because prison is density. No one has spent a night in it without spending the whole night rubbing the muscles of freedom, sore from loitering so frequently on sidewalks, exposed, naked, and hungry. Here you are embracing it from every side, free and liberated from the burden of proof. How small it is, how simple, and so swift to respond to the agility of a mirage. It is in you, within reach of the hand with which you knock at the walls of the cell. It is in you, borrowing the bird's example, in the falling of rain, the blowing of winds, the laughter of light upon a forgotten rock, in the pride of a beggar who reprimands his benefactors when they are stingy, in an unequal dialogue with your jailer when you say to him:

You, not I, are the loser. He who lives on depriving others of light drowns in the darkness of his own shadow. You will never be free of me unless my freedom is generous to a fault. Then it would teach you peace and guide you home. You, not I, are afraid of what the cell is doing to me. You who guard my sleep, dream, and a delirium mined with signs. I have the vision and you have the tower, the heavy key chain, and a gun trained on a ghost. I have sleepiness, with its silky touch and essence. You have to stay up watching over me lest sleepiness take the weapon from your hand before your eye can see it. Dreaming is my profession while yours is pointless eavesdropping on an unfriendly conversation between my freedom and me.
—Mahmoud Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence*⁴

Although the guard may gloat
his psyche is harassed
by the glut of ghosts
who bark and moan
beneath the light of the moon.

The poet-prisoner haunts the guard, who becomes a prisoner of his paranoia. The profession of the poet is dreaming. The profession of the jailer is to contain. The poet is the one who makes the light. The guard is the one who takes it. *He who lives on depriving others of light drowns in the darkness of his own shadow.* Will the ones who built the nightmare also drown in it?

The prisoner knows the true meaning of freedom while the guard knows only how to police this freedom.

What does the jailer give up when he becomes an instrument of the state?

Does the jailer remember what it means to love, to grieve, to rub the muscles of freedom or borrow the bird's example?

They cannot annihilate what we carry in our hearts and minds: This vision of an elsewhere, or the memory of a bird. How many poets and revolutionaries discovered freedom in a cell?

ENTOMBED FLOWERS

Yesterday I lay awake for a long time—these days I can't fall asleep before 1 a.m., but I have to go to bed at 10, because the light goes out then, and then I dream to myself about various things in the dark. Last night this is what I was thinking: how odd it is that I'm constantly in a joyful state of exaltation—without any particular reason. For example, I'm lying here in a dark cell on a stone-hard mattress, the usual silence of a church cemetery prevails in the prison building, it seems as though we're in a tomb; on the ceiling can be seen reflections

coming through the window from the lanterns that burn all night in front of the prison. From time to time one hears, but only in quite a muffled way, the distant rumbling of a train passing by or quite nearby under the windows the whispering of the guards on duty at night, who take a few steps slowly in their heavy boots to relieve their stiff legs. The sand crunches so hopelessly under their heels that the entire hopeless wasteland of existence can be heard in this damp, dark night. I lie there quietly, alone, wrapped in these many-layered black veils of darkness, boredom, lack of freedom, and winter—and at the same time my heart is racing with an incomprehensible, unfamiliar inner joy as though I were walking across a flowering meadow in radiant sunshine. And in the dark I smile at life, as if I knew some sort of magical secret that gives the lie to everything evil and sad and changes it into pure light and happiness. And all the while I'm searching within myself for some reason for this joy, I find nothing and must smile to myself again—and laugh at myself. I believe that the secret is nothing other than life itself; the deep darkness of night is so beautiful and as soft as velvet, if one only looks at it the right way; and in the crunching of the damp sand beneath the slow, heavy steps of the sentries a beautiful small song of life is being sung—if one only knows how to listen properly. At such moments I think of you and I would like so much to pass on this magical key to you, so that always and in all situations you would be aware of the beautiful and

the joyful, so that you too would live in a joyful euphoria as though you were walking across a multi-colored meadow. I am certainly not thinking of foisting off on you some sort of asceticism or made-up joys. I don't begrudge you all the real joys of the senses that you might wish for yourself. In addition, I would only like to pass on to you my inexhaustible inner cheerfulness, so that I could be at peace about you and not worry, so that you could go through life wearing a cloak covered with stars, which would protect you against everything petty and trivial and everything that might cause alarm.

—Rosa Luxemburg (To Sophie Liebknecht, Breslau, before December 24, 1917)⁵

In the dark of the night you traveled to a colorful meadow, and with your powerful imagination wove that meadow into a cloak of stars that you imparted to your comrade Sophie—to wear as a shield against everything terrible. What bloomed in your mind that night as you lay quietly listening to the boots of the sentries crunch the sand? You were sharpening your perceptive faculties so you could tune in to the exalted frequency. You were sensitized by your cell, by the boredom weighing you down, until the pressure of the darkness gave way to an understanding of the deepest mysteries of what it means to be alive—of the connection between desire and politics.

I think of your fate, of George Jackson's fate, of Fred Hampton's fate—the state must know when

the universe gives birth to a true revolutionary—it must see in them a light it must extinguish, lest their spark find and set alight the divine spark in us all, which would spread until the world as we know it has been upended.

Alone in your cell, your body became pure nerve. You were perceiving everything. It made you giddy, the inner joy you felt against the bleak backdrop of the Breslau prison.

I imagine how you passed the time there—studying political economy and botany, writing letters to your comrades, assembling your herbaria, preparing for the revolution, getting lost in the flowers of your imagination.

You were the secret. You were the principle of life itself. You were a tree they had to cut down.

*to unspeakable wonder
to freedom that blooms on stumps
—Édouard Glissant⁶*

THE STARS SEEN FROM PRISON

In September 1971 the prisoners of Attica rose up, took the prison, and carved out a small space of freedom: a temporary liberated zone from which they could observe the stars.

Despite the sense of foreboding, there were moments of levity and, for some, even a feeling of unexpected joy as men who hadn't felt the fresh air of night for years reveled in this strange freedom. Out in the dark, music could be heard—"drums, a guitar, vibes, flute, sax, [that] the brothers were playing." This was the lightest many of the men had felt since being processed into the maximum security facility. That night was in fact a deeply emotional time for all of them. Richard Clark watched in amazement as men embraced each other, and he saw one man break down into tears because it had been so long since he had been "allowed to get close to someone." Carlos Roche watched as tears of elation ran down the withered face of his friend "Owl," an old man who had been locked up for decades. "You know," Owl said in wonderment, "I haven't seen the stars in twenty-two years." As Clark later described this first night of the rebellion, while there was much trepidation about what might occur next, the men in D Yard also felt wonderful, because "no matter what happened later on, they couldn't take this night away from us."

—Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy*⁷

In the cracks of the prison, something bloomed. A field of wildflowers imposed on a night sky. Blood was coming. Joy and dread mingled there, infusing the air with a powerful sense of rapture and uncertainty.

What exalted frequency was discovered that night, then lost, when Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered the police to put down the uprising?

Blood was coming. The new world never arrived. How terrible it must have been for W. E. B. Du Bois to realize he had mistaken *dusk* for *dawn*, that darkness would follow and not the radiance of a new day—his people's strivings rendered crepuscular. The dream of liberation collapsed in a heap of bloodstained rubble.

Blood was coming. The drumming would not last. The prisoners would be punished for daring to glimpse the stars.

Will those who have constructed this Hell ever wonder—*What was it all for?* The subordination of all life to these systems that hem us in. *Why cover the sky?*

*

The Atacama Desert in Chile is so dry that dead bodies are preserved for posterity, and traces of ancient human communities remain unscathed, as though immortalized in amber. Because of its high elevation and lack of moisture, the skies above the Atacama Desert are completely clear, allowing for an unobstructed view of the stars. Over the years, scientists and astronomers have converged on this region to build powerful telescopes to observe the cosmos.

Years after Attica, on another continent, political prisoners banished to the Atacama Desert by

the U.S.-sponsored dictator Augusto Pinochet were observing the same stars from the confines of a prison camp.

Patricio Guzmán [documentary director]:

*What did you feel watching
the stars whilst in prison?*

Luís Henríquez [Chacabuco concentration camp survivor]:

*We all had a feeling ...
... of great freedom.
Observing the sky and the stars,
marveling at the constellations,
... we felt completely free.*

*The military banned
the astronomy lessons.
They were convinced that
the prisoners could escape ...
... guided by the constellations.*

Guzmán:

*Luis's dignity lies in his memory.
He wasn't able to escape,
but, by communicating
with the stars,
he managed to preserve
his inner freedom.
—Nostalgia for the Light, 2010⁸*

I return to the stars—

to the question of why people feel free when
looking up at the stars.

Is it because, when we are communing with the
stars, we become
part of the Whole?

The whole of Life—

we feel ourselves as recycled matter and energy
congealed in a temporary form
a form that will not hold
that will one day fall apart.

What did they feel when they looked up at the
night sky?

Did the vastness produce a feeling of freedom?

Did they remember—*there is a world beyond the
walls of this prison.*

Were they transported to their childhoods, to the
mystery,

to the first time they contemplated their
place in the Whole?

In his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois wrote about race as a prison—one that could only be abolished through a material and spiritual revolution. Anticipating the arc of my book, he wrote that the immediate problem of his people was “the question of securing existence, of labor and income, of food and home, of spiritual independence and

democratic control of the industrial process” but that it would not do to “concenter all effort on economic well-being”—that his people “must live and eat and strive, and still hold unfaltering commerce with the stars.”⁹

THE DEATH THAT IS NOT DEATH, BUT THE BIRTH OF EVERYTHING POSSIBLE

What is prison? It is immobility. “Free man, you will always cherish the sea!” (Baudelaire). It is becoming more and more obvious that mobility is one of the signs of our times. To restrict a man for eleven years to surveying the same four or five square meters—which in the end become several thousand meters within the same four walls opened up by the imagination—would justify a young man if he wanted to go ... where, for example? To China perhaps, and perhaps on foot. Jackson was this man and this imagination, and the space he traversed was quite real, a space from which he brought back observations and conclusions that strike a death blow to white America (by “America” I mean Europe too, and the world that strips all the rest, reduces it to the status of a disrespected labor force—yesterday’s colonies, today’s neocolonies). Jackson said this. He said it several thousand times and throughout the entire world. It still remained for him to say truths unbearable for our consciences. The better to silence him, the

California police But what am I saying? Jackson's book goes far beyond the reach of this police.
—Jean Genet on George Jackson¹⁰

I can only be executed once.
—George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*¹¹

Language has no body.
The message is a virus.
The message cannot be killed.

A REMIX OF A STATEMENT BY HUEY P. NEWTON, SERVANT
OF THE PEOPLE, BLACK PANTHER PARTY AT THE REVOLU-
TIONARY MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR GEORGE JACKSON:

A revolutionary example cannot be killed
The soldier and his spirit a living thing
His spirit says, George's body goes
Although fallen
See
His ideas live
In young bodies
Our children are saying
It's true
There will be revolution
And on he will go to the next legacy
We believe George's immortality
As generation upon generation advance

We know the people
We believe the people
Into immortality we win
Go on
No matter how still
How wrongly done
The love no matter how wrongly
This is pain giving up
No pain in giving up
And why he felt his life
For his people
Violence sorts spurs and contracts
Every alive state costs someone the death course
If it could give itself the semblance of executioners
—We don't
We don't have the kind of violence the police have
We deliver to them the struggle of everything possible
The audacity to accept the right to do everything
To preserve George
I see George growing in our suffering
In thirty seconds there will be pain
The prison order killing our stories won't make our
suffering die
We say there will be pain
But in all of us a strength growing
For us
An incredible will living in the pain we know
I see two kinds of death
One death is not death

The other is death
George died in a way not-death
For in all of us there is George
In our suffering there is George
I see us die the not-death
The day George fell is not his death
The future will now know the way we will die
Revolutionary death
The way his mind determined the people's name
To change them wholly or else be a feather
We'll name people THE PEOPLE
We'll support the name
In the name of the people, ALL POWER
TO THE PEOPLE ALL POWER

IMAGINATIONS HELD CAPTIVE

First of all, I would say that prison is an accurate name for our contemporary culture, and prison as culture presumes a certain set of problems and reinforces a dominant reaction in our imaginations. Sylvia Wynter talks about reservation—which is also an accurate name for our contemporary culture—meaning that at the same moment indigenous people are confined to reservations by the state, our imaginations are also confined. All of us. And, I would also say that the moments in which prisons became a dominant feature of the U.S., our imaginations (for all, not just those of us

*disproportionately imprisoned) also became imprisoned.
The way we imagine work, our relationships, the
future, family, everything, is locked down.*
—Alexis Pauline Gumbs¹²

Everywhere I look I see sleepwalkers under the spell of the prison.

What counter-spell is powerful enough to break the prison's stranglehold on our imaginations?

But the spell is never total. The intensification of the desire for life undermines the prison's capacity to structure our mental lives.

Imagination is excess, is that which could never be contained by the prison, that which will always exceed it.

What night endeavors must we embrace to enter that hidden frequency—that special vibration, the one Sun Ra believed would set us free.

THE DIALECTIC OF DREAMING

The imagination is constitutive ... It's not just unworldly, detached from the world spinning off the refusal of things, rather it's constitutive in the sense that

the imagination becomes so intense and embedded that it becomes real through its intensification and articulation. That puts theory in the realm of prophecy, but not prophecy in the realm of saying what's going to happen. Instead, it's the fostering of the imagination, the encouraging of that power to recognize that life can be, and in some ways already is, different.

—Michael Hardt¹³

Dreams and reality are opposites. Action synthesizes them.

—Assata Shakur¹⁴

Before Assata Shakur was liberated from prison, her grandmother and family came to visit her, bearing a dream: “You’re coming home soon,” her grandmother said. “I don’t know when it will be, but you’re coming home. You’re getting out of here. It won’t be too long, though.” She went on: “I dreamed we were in our old house in Jamaica ... i was dressing you ... putting your clothes on.” Assata’s grandmother was known for her prophetic dreams—they came when they were needed, but it was ultimately the responsibility of the recipients of the visions to make them real, not only by believing in the veracity of the prophecies, but by acting so as to give them flesh.

When Assata returned to her prison cell, she could not help but dance and sing. She writes, “No amount of scientific, rational thinking could

diminish the high that i felt. A tingly, giddy excitement had caught hold of me. I had gotten drunk on my family's arrogant, carefree optimism. I literally danced in my cell, singing, 'Feet, don't fail me now.' I sang the 'feet' part real low, so i guess the guards must have thought i was bugging out, stomping around my cage singing 'feet,' 'feet.'"

When we act in accordance with the prophetic dream, the dream comes to directly constitute reality.

THE POLITICS OF DREAMING

We are building a reality that we have never seen before. We are asking people to flex their visioning and dreaming skills, something that is not readily supported in our society.

—Mia Mingus¹⁵

I think there is an inherent danger in conflating militant reform and human rights strategies with the underlying logic of anti-prison radicalism, which conceives of the ultimate eradication of the prison as a site of state violence and social repression. What is required, at least in part, is a new vernacular that enables this kind of political dream. How does prison abolition necessitate new political language, teachings, and organizing strategies?

—Dylan Rodriguez¹⁶

Sometimes I don't know what to tell you, or how to end.

For some time I have been thinking about how to convey the message of police and prison abolition to you, but I know that as a poet, it is not my job to win you over with a persuasive argument, but to impart to you a *vibrational experience* that is capable of awakening your desire for another world.

A couple of years ago I saw the Black Arts Movement poet and activist Sonia Sanchez speak. I was moved by the way she paused whenever she experienced vertigo and spontaneously started singing as a way to find her rhythm after nearly passing out.

In a haiku Sonia writes:

without your
residential breath
*i lose my timing.*¹⁷

Our bodies are not closed loops. We hold each other and keep each other in time by marching, singing, embracing, breathing.

We synchronize our tempos so we can find a rhythm through which the urge to live can be expressed, collectively.

And in this way, we set the world into motion.

In this way, poets become the timekeepers of the revolution.

PLANTING THE DREAM

What shall we build on the ashes of a nightmare?
—Robin D. G. Kelley¹⁸

I won't propose much more since the design and realization of such a space ought to be the product of a collective imagination shaped and reshaped by the very process of turning rubble and memory into the seeds of a new society.
—Robin D. G. Kelley¹⁹

I see

I see our shadow in the trees

Watching the wheel unfold

I see our one shadow on the wall

I see your restless hand in the spider's thread

I am the ice cave and there is water,
deep blue and white, a light at the bottom

I am equal to my love for you

Let down your hair, willow
in the moonlight: the river
lulls us into the dream. Nightmares
jostle branches in our eyes. I long
for the world that is before you,
the plate you set on the slate
of tomorrow. Your fingers flutter
to feel for the grass

between the valley,
where one foot follows the other
into the flaming creek.

We don't know what name to give
the throbbing stone
perched atop the hill.

From here, I see for you
Look at what I lost
when you were lost
and I could only hear
the call of the stones

A body, returned
floats down the river
dressed in candles

I send you the secret
while you are asleep

The nights you carried in the length of a strand of hair—
The unforgiving flash of his teeth—
I stroke your cheek to unlock your jaw
and release the rose you carry in your mouth

Your tongue is raw
and your mouth
is filling with blood

Dear
Dear,

Forgive us for having fallen so far
from where you planted the seed:

At the bottom of the sea, waiting
for the body to ride the stream
back to where the rubble
gave birth to the first
dream

The egg cracks, night
wanders seaward
barefoot in her evening
slip

And by this sadness you are shown
the path to the holding sea, a trail
burned by a herd of somnambulant turtles
who folded, one by one, in their grief
until a single remained
to carry the breath of time
back
to the seed.

¶ Instead of prison walls—
Bloom flowery fields.