

# TOIL

unearthing abolition

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## **FOREWORD** *Against Punishment*

When we were invited by the Museum of London to create a programme for young Black Londoners as part of their ongoing Black Heritage London producers scheme, we were excited. A similar project, *Baldwin's Nigger Reloaded*, organised by Barby Asante & Teresa Cisneros at Iniva, led directly to the formation of *sorryyoufeeluncomfortable*, the collective in which we began working together alongside several other passionately engaged 18-24 year olds back in 2014. Access to space and resources to explore our ideas creatively, among a peer group, has been invaluable to the nurturing and growth of our own artistic, curatorial and political-selves, and was the foundation for the development of our individual practices and the establishment of Languid Hands, the moniker under which we currently work as a duo.

It has been an honour to support this cohort of black practitioners Amber, Akhera, Baby Blue & Makella Ama, to creatively explore their ideas for this publication. *Toil: Unearthing Abolition* is the culmination of six months of writing, discussion, group study and encounters with political texts, film works, poetry, music and the museum's collections, in particular the *Executions* exhibition at the Museum of London Docklands.

Our process began with an introductory session exploring our values as a group. Next, Imani facilitated a close reading group delving deeply into the work of geographer Dr. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, through her 2017 essay *Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence*. Gilmore's critical scholarship on abolition, carcerality, racial capitalism and temporal-spatial politics, not to mention her decades long commitment to political organising and collective action, is foundational in our own thinking as well as many a student of abolition. In her work, with rigour, we are ushered away from thinking abolition as a fixed concept, and instead reoriented toward a new way of spatialising our lives; here is a reintegration of the inside / outside. We are reminded that to think geographically about abolition and carcerality is to think abolition as itself a place, that abolition geographies exist as 'the antagonistic contradiction of carceral geographies' (p.226), that we in turn must make and make again ourselves. Gilmore invites us to think critically, imaginatively, and beyond the scope of that which can be co-opted for liberal ends. It is an essay we keep coming back to, and encourage others to do the same.

Next, Rabz hosted a session inspired by their ongoing project, *Black Film Anti-School*, which aims to develop spaces for thinking about blackness and film beyond representation and towards liberation. We shared a list of films prior to the session for the group to choose from and watch, and we spent the session discussing what the films' form and content made us think about in relation to the prison-industrial-complex and wider ideas about carcerality. The films explored were: Peter Watkins' *Punishment Park* (1971), John Akomfrah & The Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1979), Ngozi Onwurah's *Welcome II The Terrordome* (1995), Bill Duke's *Deep Cover* (1992), Ivan Dixon's *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* (1973), Menelik Shabazz's *Breaking Point - The SUS Law and Black Youth* (1978), Theo Anthony's *All Light, Everywhere* (2021), Phil Collins' *Bring Down The Walls* (2020), and our own collaborative short film *Towards A Black Testimony: Prayer/Protest/Peace* (2019) which extends Imani's research into evidence, materiality and the insufficiency of legal forums to hold and meet the testimony of black people.

Wherever possible in our work, we invite our own peers and mentors to hold space alongside us, to share their thoughts, practices and insights as a sort of ongoing exchange. For this project, we invited writer and therapist Foluke Taylor to think through punishment and its relationship to the therapeutic. We explored how prison abolition and carceral logics find their way into our intimate lives and inform how we show up in interpersonal conflict and also relationships of care and connection. With Dr. Gail Lewis, a writer, psychotherapist, researcher and activist who was involved in the Brixton Black Women's Group and the founding of the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), we thought critically about the scope of the State and its overwhelming capaciousness in the structuring of our lives. Using the metaphor of steam, we also explored the emotional state of yearning for freedom in carceral geographies.

Artist and writer Samra Mayanja's session explored the notion of revenge through an exercise in scriptwriting. Using a mixture of structured and free writing, we each thought about a time in our lives where we had experienced the desire for revenge, and constructed a scene in which the intricacies (or indeed, the banalities) of that desire could be explored. Finally, we invited writer and researcher Lola Olufemi to lead a workshop on experimental political writing. After a close reading and discussion of varied experimental texts selected by Lola, the group were given prompts to begin writing their own, and each read aloud and revelled in the results.

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In the opening section of *Abolition Geography*, Gilmore writes: 'What's extracted from the extracted is *the* resource of life-time' (p.226). Amber's gorgeously written, metaphorical, poetic piece *Wasting Time* takes this

assertion as a starting point, exploring with great tactility their relationship to time as it is personified, stolen, disintegrated and rebelled against.

*Digging for Definition*, an activity developed by Akhera and practised by the group as a whole, sees you, the reader, invited to take part in a process of defining punishment in a way that resists universal definitions and focuses on the core meanings of this concept for *you personally*.

*Good Grief: Pain Decomposed* is a deeply personal exploration of two specific experiences of grief experienced by Baby Blue in response to the deaths of Jamal and \_\_\_\_\_. Through the careful retelling of the impact that these two young black people, and their premature deaths, had on the writer, Blue demonstrates the complexity of reckoning with harm, anger, pain and collective responsibility. They also shed light, with great generosity and vulnerability, on the difficulty of leaning into the abolitionist principles of anti-carcerality and resistance to punishment, blame and revenge, alongside the magnitude and intensity of feeling in the face of utterly preventable harms.

Akhera's second contribution, *Musings of a Baby Abolitionist*, takes as its starting point an anecdote from abolitionist scholar & writer Ruth Wilson Gilmore in which a member of Gilmore's family called the police on another. The fact of carceral politics' presence even in such an influential abolitionist's familial and interpersonal relationships inspired Akhera to reflect on her own, specifically, to speak to her three brothers about their opinions on the prison-industrial-complex, abolition and approaches to harm in society. Akhera's essay presents some key parts of the interviews she undertook, and uses her own research, work by Gilmore, and reflections from our process as a group, to troubleshoot, analyse and question the perspectives of her brothers, as well as continually analyse her own. It foregrounds the complex work of abolition and what Akhera describes as the "societal residue that needs care & attention to untangle". She bravely takes up difficult analyses of punishment in childhood and inside the prison, from the interpersonal to the institutional, in complex conversations around definitions of care, justice, and how to think in a more nuanced way about the victim/perpetrator, innocent/guilty binary that defines carceral approaches to harm. Sitting with difference, and being present to conversations that may be able to bridge those gaps, is central to this essay, and central to the often uncertain work of new-future-building that abolition will require.

Makella's piece *A Countervailing Theory in Five Parts* takes five different but ultimately converging approaches to its subject. In the first, Makella recounts and analyses an experience from her time as a social worker, supporting a young black boy as he navigates the court system, sentencing and the immediate transition out of police custody. The second takes the form of a series of questions, poetically posed and evoking sensorial

experiences. The third, more questions: notes, handwritten this time, in the form of a chart, and reflecting on defining harm, hate, violence and crime. Part four is an extended reflection on steam as a central metaphor offered by Dr. Gail Lewis. The fifth and final part comes as another activity for you dear reader; the writing of a letter to your 80-year-old self.

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Seeing this publication come together, and the depth, rigour and generosity of this cohorts' contributions both to our ongoing discussions, and in their writing, has been a moving experience for us. Sitting down now, to read the words of these four beautiful writers at the end of this wayward and unruly process, we are met with the residing feeling of being truly touched to have been able to witness them, work alongside them, and play the smallest part in the development of these brilliant abolition geographies. What a joy it is, to always be learning.

Our deepest gratitude goes to our co-conspirators and co-facilitators named and unnamed, specifically Foluke, Gail, Samra and Lola, and to the authors Amber, Akhera, Baby Blue & Makella Ama. May we all forever be humble students of freedom! May we find bright moments in our collective place-making! May we toil, and toiling, unearth that which seeks to find us!

Imani Mason Jordan & Rabz Lansiquot  
Languid Hands

London, March 2023.

**The prison-industrial-complex (PIC)** is a term used 'to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems' (Critical Resistance - <https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/>)

**Prison Abolition** is a concept that rejects the common-place assumption that prisons are a necessary part of a just society. **PIC Abolition** 'is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.' (Critical Resistance - <https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/>) Check out [abolitionistfutures.com](http://abolitionistfutures.com) for further resources with a UK focus.

**Carcerality** simply means relating to incarceration, imprisonment, and other kinds of institutionalised punishment.

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