Abstract

The Prison Abolition Movement has an ambivalent relationship with the state and with what is commonly known as 'electoral politics.' They often see state institutions as inherently violent, leading the movement to promote a complete transformation of society. However, the state has a monopoly over all institutional processes and establishments, including those that allow for social change, making this goal particularly challenging. In addition, the state often has complete control over the lives of people abolitionists' center in their organizing efforts, such as incarcerated individuals. Therefore, prison abolitionists must engage with the state, an act that can be seen as reinforcing the legitimacy of structures they mostly disapprove of. This thesis explores such tensions, developing a conceptual toolkit for the abolitionist perspective on the relationship between the state and society. This toolkit provides language for the ways in which abolitionists organize, mostly through state engagement, while minimizing the amount of legitimacy they provide it.

In this thesis, I argue that prison abolitionists are able to reconceptualize how state engagement is defined by grounding their organizing in their values of community care; I call this value-based organizing. This conceptualization seeks to highlight the ways in which prison abolitionists' ground their work in their shared values, and how such a foundation allows them to engage with the state while pushing back on its authority. I demonstrate how the identities of abolitionist organizers are often shaped by their values, providing them a guiding framework; such perspective allows activists to engage with the state while deprioritizing it, maintaining their agency and autonomy. By doing so, they shift existing power structures: even though they actively engage with the state, such activity does not center state power, but the people.

This theoretical analysis was created from the lived experiences of seventeen abolitionist organizers from across the United States which I had the privilege of interviewing, combined with supplementary theoretical sources. By doing so, this research uses a version of grounded theory, a method of data analysis which seeks to build a theory from emerging data, asking interviewees open-ended questions, and grouping the responses into common themes. I present the data using composite narratives, which are stories woven together- created from quotes of multiple participants- allowing enhanced reader resonance and making my data accessible to a non-academic audience.

Revolution or Reform?

A Theoretical Analysis of the Prison Abolition Movement and State Engagement

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To Michael Conlon

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אריאל: איך אפשר לשכוח? תודה על הכל. זאת הייתה חתיכת שנה, והפרויקט הזה לא היה קל בכלל- וכל שיחה איתך הזכירה לי לחייך ועשתה את הסופ"ש שלי קצת יותר קל, והרבה יותר כיף. אוהבת ומתגעגעת המון

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Introduction

Prison abolitionists have a complicated relationship with the state. It is often framed as one of antagonism and mistrust. As Ace, an abolitionist organizer from Massachusetts, stated when I interviewed them:

> As an abolitionist, I believe that the systems that we have, as they exist, are not liberatory systems. We will not gain freedom by just tinkering around and making small changes or reforms inside that system. I do believe that we need to create a whole new society-- so social transformation.[1]

An abolitionist analysis perceives systems of prisons and policing- and for some, the state as a whole- as fundamentally violent. Therefore, abolitionists aim to weaken its power and authority. In the long term, abolitionists seek to create new structures for society that reconceptualize how harm is addressed while ensuring that everyone's needs are met. At the same time, they acknowledge that such goals should be advanced incrementally, slowly diminishing the function and power of prisons in society.[2]

While advancing their goals incrementally, prison abolitionists often engage with state institutions, an act that stands in tension with their long-term goals of social transformation. It could imply that the existence of institutions such as prisons are justifiable, and therefore, their approach to crime and harm is appropriate. On a larger scale, state engagement could imply that a system is serving society properly, perpetuating a narrative in which violent structures are seen as legitimate and therefore should be maintained. Therefore, state engagement could be seen as

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[1] Ace (pseudonym), interview by Stav Keshet, August 2021.

[2] Fay Honey Knopp et al, *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists.* Self- published, Prison Research and Education Project. Syracuse, 1976.

strengthening state power. By doing so, state engagement could negate the long-term goals of prison abolitionists, which aims to completely transform current structures and renegotiate how we allocate resources and address social problems.

This project seeks to understand how organizers advance a radical transformation of society while working within its existing structures. When considering purely the Prison Industrial Complex[3], state engagement is often seen as an act of harm mitigation: a way to reduce the harm that the state inflicts through incarceration and policing. The state holds power over the institutions that govern the people most impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex, such as incarcerated individuals, their families, and communities. While current models for any short-term reform center state actors, reducing the everyday trauma on people impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex makes state engagement an urgent measure. However, harm reduction strategies can also strengthen the state. The act of paying someone's bail allows an individual to be released from a literal cage, yet it provides more monetary resources to the criminal legal system. Some might argue that advocating for more humane conditions in prisons implies the underlying logic of incarceration is appropriate, and therefore negates the long-term goal of abolition. Yet, the monopoly of the state over institutional processes means that in order to advance any short-term reforms, one must engage with the state. This is the underlying tension this project explores: in order to advance any of their goals, abolitionists must reinforce the legitimacy of systems they seek to get rid of.

I had the privilege of speaking to seventeen abolitionist organizers from across the United States, asking them about their history within the movement and their personal

[3] Critical Resistance defines the Prison Industrial Complex as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems." See page 30 for further notes on my use of this term.

ideologies. I center my work around their struggles, lived experiences, and understanding of the tensions I explore. Their identities, backgrounds, and histories were diverse. Most had a significant history of abolitionist organizing and all were deeply committed to abolition. To some degree, they all cited the tremendous amount of violence caused by the Prison Industrial Complex as an influence on their activism. I attempt to explain activists' ideologies regarding state engagement, while doing my best to ground my work in real life experiences, not purely academic scholarship. In addition, while this project seeks to understand the role of the state in the prison abolition movement, it also asks: What should this role be? How should abolitionists engage with the state? How should prison abolitionists navigate the tension between their radical long-term vision and the urgency of today?

To assist abolitionists with such struggles, Critical Resistance, a leading prison abolition organization in the United States, established criteria for acceptable short-terms reforms, using the concepts of 'reformist' and 'non reformist' reforms. Originally coined by philosopher Andre Gorz when writing about the anti-capitalist struggle, a 'reformist' reform is one that "subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy."[4] When applied to the prison abolition movement, Critical Resistance prompts abolitionists to ask the following questions: does this reform 1) reduce the number of people imprisoned, under surveillance, or under other forms of state control? 2) reduce the reach of jails, prisons, and surveillance in our everyday lives? 3) create resources and infrastructures that are steady, preventative, and accessible without police and prison guard contact? 4) strengthen capacities to prevent or address harm and create processes for community accountability?[5] If

[4] Andre Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal*, trans. Martin A. Nicholas and Victoria Ortiz (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 7.
[5] "Reformist reforms vs. abolitionist steps to end imprisonment," Critical Resistance, accessed August 20, 2021, http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CR_abolitioniststeps_antiexpansion_2021_eng.pdf

reforms do not meet these criteria, they are 'reformist reforms', and therefore should not be pursued. These guidelines have been a primary resource for activists when engaging with the state, considering strategies that increase community well-being while avoiding reforms that increase incarceration.

When attempting to decide how to engage with the state and which reforms to pursue, abolitionist scholarship often centers the allotment of public funds. The logic behind this consideration is that abolitionists use the allocation of resources as a tangible strategy to weaken the Prison Industrial Complex and provide infrastructure for services they see as better equipped to prevent or address harm. Community activist and influential prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba has offered a guide that, while focusing on police reform, centers the ability of reforms to provide more material resources to the Prison Industrial Complex. In her theorization of how to evaluate abolitionist and state engagement, she asks the following questions: "Does it allocate more money to the police? Does it advocate for more police and policing? Is the reform primarily technology-focused? Is it focused on individual dialogues with individual cops?" If so, abolitionists must oppose such reforms.

However, Kaba supports interim reforms that offer reparations for victims of police brutality, redirect policing and prisons funds to other social goods, propose elected "independent civilian accountability boards with power to investigate, discipline, fire police officers and administrators (with some serious caveats)", disarm the police, simplify the process of dissolving police departments and provide data transparency.[6] While not all of Kaba's questions explicitly address the allocation of funds, they address the underlying notion behind it-- that depriving the Prison Industrial Complex from resources will decrease its power. They also address the

[6] Mariame Kaba, "Police 'Reforms' You Should Always Oppose," *Truthout,* published December 7, 2014, https://truthout.org/articles/police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose/

reallocation of public safety funds towards non-repressing services[7], which an abolitionist framework sees as equally important. Kaba's guide operates from the logic that resources provide power, and therefore, abolitionists must never support reforms that allocate more resources to the Prison Industrial Complex.

In addition to focusing on the allocation of resources, prison abolitionists are often weary of their own efforts being co-opted by the state, and therefore legitimizing the existing carceral system. Prominent scholar and advocate Dorothy Roberts argues that "efforts to fix the criminal punishment system to make it fairer or more inclusive are inadequate or even harmful because the system's repressive outcomes don't result from any systemic malfunction." Rather, the Prison Industrial Complex is successful in its objective, which is to oppress and control Black communities. Therefore, prison abolitionists oppose reforms that aim to improve the operation of the Prison Industrial Complex rather than challenge the punitive logic behind it.[8] These concerns are often expressed by a resistance to reforms that may improve conditions in the short-term, but in the long term allow the Prison Industrial Complex to grow by reinforcing the ideology that supports it. Scholarship surrounding legitimacy does not completely abandon state engagement; however, it highlights the significance of challenging the authority of the state in addressing harm when doing so, especially through common discourse or public messaging.

Guidelines with simple, straightforward criteria are often valuable resources for organizers when engaging with the state. Moreover, I do not seek to erase the significant contributions of existing scholarship regarding state engagement- particularly the concept of non-reformist reforms, and frameworks related to resources and legitimacy. However, I would like to challenge existing scholarship by arguing that while extremely beneficial, many existing

[7] Examples could include, but are not limited to, mental health services, education, and more.
[8] Dorothy E. Roberts, "Abolition Constitutionalism," *Harvard Law Review 1,* no. 133 (2019): 42-43.

guidelines paint methods of state engagement through a dichotomous lens. Such narrative implies that one chooses to either reinforce the legitimacy of the carceral system and/or the state, or not. Yet, as I listened to the experiences of organizers, I learned that often, the decisions that they make regarding state engagement were much more complicated. Sometimes, they engaged with state institutions out of necessity. Sometimes, they found hope in the state- a path for meaningful reform. At times, they felt as if they were forced into situations where they *had to* provide the state, or the criminal legal system, with more resources or legitimacy. I aim to understand such decisions and the nuances they entail; furthermore, I hope to provide further guidelines to prison abolitionists, acknowledging that at times, they might inadvertently reinforce state legitimacy.

In this thesis, I develop a conceptual toolkit for the abolitionist perspective on the relationship between the state and society. This toolkit provides language for the ways in which abolitionists organize, mostly through state engagement, while minimizing the amount of legitimacy they provide it. I argue that prison abolitionists are able to reconceptualize how state engagement is defined by grounding their organizing in their values of community care; I call this *value-based organizing*. This conceptualization seeks to highlight the ways in which prison abolitionists ground their work in their shared values, and how such a foundation allows them to engage with the state while pushing back on its authority.

The emphasis on "values" within *value-based organizing* does not argue that other forms of organizing are not formed around shared values. However, I argue that *value-based organizing* is a distinct form of organizing through its prioritization of values over a specific strategy or outcome. It is important to note that the goals of the prison abolition movement are motivated, and therefore deeply connected, to its values; yet, I argue that abolitionists see their

values of community care as the primary factor in their organizing.[9] Other forms of organizing do not necessarily prioritize their values as abolitionists do, and could see a particular outcome or tactic as a priority when organizing.[10]

In this thesis, I argue that the practice of *value-based organizing* provides a guiding framework for abolitionist organizing and state engagement. Through this framework, organizers ground their activism in their ethical commitments to what they perceive as their communities. Therefore, this practice is grounded in an ethic of care. Moreover, the identities of organizers are often shaped by their values; such perspective allows activists to engage with the state while deprioritizing it, maintaining their agency and autonomy. By doing so, they shift existing power structures: even though they actively engage with the state, such activity does not center state power, but the people.

Methodology

This project uses interviews conducted with seventeen activists[11] that are associated with the prison abolition movement. These interviews were approved by the Mount Holyoke College Institutional Review Board. My decision to use qualitative research was motivated by a desire to have a holistic understanding of participants' experiences as organizers and their relationship to the state. Qualitative research, while more common in Sociology and Anthropology, can provide a unique addition to existing scholarship in political science by uncovering insights on

[9] For example, prison abolitionists would not be willing to sacrifice the wellbeing of incarcerated individuals in order to shut down a prison.

[10] A prominent example for organizing that is not *value based* is the "fight for 15" movement which began in 2012. While the movements' goal is motivated by an ideology that everyone deserves a living wage, it is grounded in the outcome of raising the minimum wage to $15/hour and prioritizes that outcome in its organizing.

[11] While the sample size is comparatively small, it is nonetheless significant given the rich experiences and perspectives that each participant was able to provide.

participants' ideologies and the meaning they make of them- processes that could escape scholarly analysis if done purely through quantitative methods.[12]

All participants were affiliated with abolitionist organizations. Organizations were identified by the following criteria: the organization either explicitly stated to be abolitionist, advocated for divesting from the Prison Industrial Complex and investing in community based social services, or is working to create community-based alternatives to address harm.[13] Organizations were contacted via email and/or social media, where I introduced my project and asked if any of their members would be willing to be interviewed. In addition, I recruited several participants by emailing a mailing list of abolitionist organizers accessible to me, as well as posting about my project on my personal social media account. When considering sample size representation, participants from Massachusetts were relatively overrepresented (4 out of 17) due to my personal connections. In addition, I was not able to interview participants who were associated with an organization whose work was solely focused on creating community-based alternatives to addressing harm- although many participants engaged in such activities. This is important to note, as the work of such organizations largely does not require state engagement, and therefore activists from such organizations might have had different perspectives on state engagement.

Just like this project is informed by the work of organizers, the activists I talked to were often informed by their interaction with the Prison Industrial Complex. Such influence was formed either through their personal experiences or through connections with impacted

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[12] Calvin Chen, "The Worm- Eye's View: Using Ethnography to Illuminate Labor Politics and Institutional Change in Contemporary China," in *Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies*, ed Allen Carson (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 137.

[13] Organizations websites and social media handles were examined to determine if they fit the criteria for an abolitionist organization.

individuals. They saw their work as influenced by the relationships that they built and how such relationships helped form their values, something I seek to highlight in this project.

Such sentiments were highlighted in participants' interviews:

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> *What do the people most directly impacted by these systems or this decision that I'd be making, how do they feel about it? What is it that they want? And I think that, very often, I also make those decisions based on my relationships with real people and- I guess- based on those relationships, having a better understanding of the impact of those decisions. You know folks of many ethnicities, from many regions of the country, almost exclusively poor people, so all of that [has] like been a very concrete and transformative experience in my life- to just learn about how people ended up in prison, who these people are, you know, it's obviously a humanizing experience, [because] ultimately, social movements are made with relationships, and an intimate conversation that builds a deep relationship can get you a lot farther than a thin relationship with the hundreds of people who may listen to you.*[14]

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Such sentiments highlight the relationship between personal experiences with the state and one's ideology to state engagement; yet this project was limited by my inability to interview prison abolitionists who are currently incarcerated. While I was able to interview organizers who were impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex, including formerly incarcerated individuals,

[14] Narrative: Relationships. See Appendix H.

further projects should explicitly center the people most impacted by prisons and policing. The voices of incarcerated individuals are extremely valuable to any kind of scholarly research- or even just common discourse- regarding the Prison Industrial Complex, yet strict regulation in jails and prisons make it so that they are often left out of the conversation.

Participants were affiliated with the following organizations: Abolition Apostles (National), Black and Pink (Seattle & Chicago chapters), Building Up People not Prisons Coalition (Boston, MA), Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (Oakland, CA), Critical Resistance (Portland chapter), Dream Defenders (Goddsville, FL), Families for Justice as Healing (Boston, MA), Fight Toxic Prisons, National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls (National), Northampton Abolition Now (Northampton, MA), Oakland Abolition and Solidarity (Oakland, CA), Southsiders Organized for Unity and Liberation (Chicago, IL), Spirit House (Durham, NC), Texas Abolitionists, and Women on the Rise (Atlanta, GA).

Interviews were conducted over Zoom, with the exception of one asynchronous, written interview. Interviews ranged between 30 and 70 minutes, with the average interview length being 60 minutes. Participants were given the opportunity to remain anonymous and be identified by a pseudonym. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, with all participants asked the same central questions, and follow up questions adjusted accordingly. Participants were asked to provide their gender, race, and socioeconomic status, and were able to provide additional demographic information if they desired. Participants were also asked about their personal experiences with the Prison Industrial Complex. Participants were given the opportunity to add any additional information they thought would be beneficial to the project.

All participants agreed to an oral consent form as approved by the Mount Holyoke College Institutional Review Board.

Interview transcripts were coded by topic using the coding software NVivo and manually transformed into *composite narratives,* defined as "a first-person account that is written as a vignette by using data from multiple participants' interview transcripts to represent a specific aspect of the research findings."[15] Participants were provided the opportunity to review the narratives in order to see if they accurately represent their ideologies, and provide any necessary corrections.[16] Appendix A provides an in-depth documentation of the process in which I created the narratives, and Appendix B, C, D, E, F, G, and H provides the full narratives while specifying which quote belongs to which organizer. Appendix I details my interview schedule, with a summary of the questions I asked my participants.

Conceptual framework

1) *Grounded Theory*

While I did not know this when I began my research, this project utilizes a version of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a method of data analysis that is made from the ground up: instead of approaching research with preconceived theories and applying them, "the researcher begins instead by collecting data, engaging in open line-by-line analysis, creating larger themes from these data, and linking them together in a larger story."[17] The most important rule in

[15] Olivia Johnston, Helen Wildy and Jennifer Shand, "Student voices that resonate – Constructing composite narratives that represent students' classroom experiences," *Qualitative Research* (2021) ttps://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211016158 , 3.
[16] While all participants were given the opportunity to provide corrections to their interviews, not all of them desired to do so.
[17] Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 30.

grounded theory is to study the emerging data, rather than using research questions or existing literature. I use grounded theory as I center myself in the experiences of the organizers that I interview, yet this research does not solely ground itself in the emerging data. An iterative analysis "alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories."[18] Such definition closely correlates to the conceptual framework of my project; while I strive to center the emerging data from my interviews, I also use existing abolitionist (and non-abolitionist) theory as supplementary sources.

2) *Composite Narratives*

As mentioned previously, I use composite narratives as the primary method used to present my interview findings. Composite narratives are "stories that are woven together to represent interview data from multiple participants, presenting complex ideas in a way that can impact on audiences and maximize reader resonance."[19] Composite narratives depart from the traditional depiction of qualitative interviews, in which the research presents quotes of specific participants throughout the project. Instead, they portray the research findings using a first person, story-telling style. Each of the narratives I created presents a different common theme that was present in my interview findings, and all of the narratives are blend quotes of several different interviewees. There are a variety of different methodologies for creating composite narratives: Appendix A details mine.

I have several reasons for using this framework to present my interview findings. First, it allows me to demonstrate a more holistic experience of the organizers I interviewed. Willis provides the concept of the 'emotional truth', defined by Susie Orbach as "an authentic

[18] Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact,* 184.
[19] Johnston, Wildy, Shand, "Student voices that resonate – Constructing composite narratives that represent students' classroom experiences," 3.

representation of feeling states rather than a strict adherence to narrative truth". She claims that through the use of an 'emotional truth,' narratives can help capture participants' state of being, rather than a specific experience. Therefore, narratives allow me to authentically capture the tensions and struggles that prison abolitionists struggle with, rather than use single quotes as examples.[20] In addition, if I were to simply present my interpretation of the interviews, without narratives, I would risk prioritizing my analysis over participants' lived experiences. The use of narratives enhances participant agency by allowing them to depict their own stories and demonstrate the research findings themselves.

Moreover, composite narratives allow me to portray the complexities and nuances in the topic I seek to explore. Willis argues that "narratives allow research to be presented in a way which acknowledges the complexities of individual motivations and outlooks, whilst drawing out more generalized learning and understanding."[21] Therefore, composites allow me to use the deeply intricate and individualized experiences of organizers as a method to understand the entire movement and the ways in which activists struggle with the tensions of state engagement. Moreover, by using storytelling, narratives make research accessible to a non-academic audience, allowing this project to be shared with any reader, activist, or organizer who is interested in the question I am exploring.

An additional benefit to composite narratives is the one of anonymity. Composite narratives provide an additional protection to participants "through mixing accounts, thereby preventing the possibility of identifying a research subject through a combination of details."[22] Only three participants expressed a desire to remain anonymous, and all were openly engaged in

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[20] Rebecca Willis, "The use of composite narratives to present interview findings." *Qualitative Research* 19, no. 4 (2019), 472.
[21] Willis, "The Use of Composite Narratives to Present Interview Findings," 476.
[22] Willis, "The Use of Composite Narratives to Present Interview Findings," 477.

abolitionist organizing and did not seek to hide that information. However, some participants still expressed concerns regarding the consequences of this project being widely available. The use of composite narratives provided me with an opportunity to protect the confidentiality of participants beyond the use of pseudonyms.

The main limitation of using composite narratives as a research method is that it provides a large burden on the researcher to ensure that the composites 'match' the data. Therefore, the reader must rely on my presentation and interpretation of the data. However, sociologist Victoria Reyes argues that a method to overcome such concerns is through transparency. Specifically, that researchers should be precise about what they count as data or information and how and over what period of time they collected them. She argues that "if research relies on data (e.g. observations, interviews) for the accumulation of knowledge, then making ethnographic data more transparent should be of scholarly concern." For her, because ethnographic research aims to contribute to more generalized knowledge, scholars should be concerned with understanding how and why their methods are scientific- while taking into account the interpretive foundation of their work.[23] I take such limitations seriously: I made sure to research the variety of ways that scholars have created composite narratives in previous research, ensuring that I am as equipped as possible to apply this methodology to my research. In addition, I documented every step in which I created my narratives, and provided an in-depth documentation of my methodology in Appendix A. Appendix B, C, D, E, F, G and H detail the individual narratives I created, separated according to the themes of my research findings. In those narratives, I attribute individual sentences to specific participants. Lastly, Appendix I details my interview schedule, listing the questions that my participants were asked.

[23] Victoria Reyes, "Three models of transparency in ethnographic research: Naming places, naming people, and sharing data," *Ethnography 19*, no. 2 (2018): 205.

Chapter outline

Chapter one examines the abolitionist conceptualization of the state as an entity, and the way abolitionists view the relationship between the state and society. I introduce the abolitionist framework for *value-based organizing,* arguing that it is largely influenced and shaped by state engagement. I center this chapter in Boggs' et al *revolution of values* as a future oriented, empowering framework, one which allows abolitionists to ground their organizing in the people despite the social influence of ideologies and mindsets which prioritize punishment. I argue that direct experience with the carceral state is necessary in order to understand abolition as a practical, urgent matter, and therefore shapes an abolitionist conceptualization of *value-based organizing.*

I continue to engage with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's essay *The University and the Undercommons* to demonstrate how the power of the state makes it impossible to refuse it; yet, the impossibility of refusal allows one to understand how *value-based organizing* complements Boggs' et al *revolution of values* and the agency that it provides. I argue that while a *revolution of values* provides abolitionists with agency over the foundational values of society, *value-based organizing* provides a framework for abolitionists to maintain such autonomy while engaging with the state. By doing so, they center their authority in a more practical way. Finally, I demonstrate how my participants grounded their organizing in their values of community care, an approach which is necessary in order to engage with the state while deprioritizing it.

Chapter two interrogates the state's monopoly over institutional processes and questions whether such monopoly applies to the meaning of democracy as a whole. First, I examine Saidiya Hartman's concept of 'the Chorus' to demonstrate the multiple ways in which

community belonging allows for a reconceptualization of state engagement as methods of community care, agency, and resistance. All such practices demonstrate crucial elements of *value-based organizing:* by foregrounding community relationships, organizers reconceptualized the meaning of civic engagement to one which is rooted in values. Then, I use Dorothy Roberts' concept of a *New Abolitionism Constitutionalism,* building on her understanding of state engagement as a method for marginalized communities to autonomously secure their own rights.

I then argue that through *value-based organizing,* state engagement can be a way for abolitionists to push back against who the state deems worthy. I use the examples of voting, advising elected officials and running for office to demonstrate that *value-based organizing* is a tangible way in which prison abolitionists can reconceptualize state engagement; I argue that when doing so, they center the democratic process on their care ethic.

Chapter three explores a conceptualization of abolition that requires not only unlearning dominant approaches to harm, but to the ways in which knowledge and ideas are promoted; scholar Liat Ben Moshe defines this process of unlearning as a form of *dis-epistemology.*[24] I use such conceptualization to investigate the ways in which abolitionists communicate, both with state institutions and the public, while rejecting hegemonic forms of knowledge acquisition. First, I engage with Amna Akbar's analysis of the Movement for Black Lives' policy proposal, titled "The Vision." I argue that the Vision is a form of *dis-epistemology* by pushing back on traditional notions of prescription, certainty, and specific demands, and instead, centering communities, a larger vision, and creativity. I continue and argue that such framework is rooted in shared values of care, and therefore is a practice of *value-based organizing.*

[24] Liat Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," in *Decarcerating Disability : Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 126.

I then discuss the practice of *value-based organizing* within the context of communicating with the public, arguing that it does not require one to unlearn certain forms of knowledge acquisition. I demonstrate how when communicating with community members, participants prioritized their values over one's political affiliation. Therefore, I argue that in such instances, dominant forms of knowledge acquisition allow one to ground themselves in their values of care, and therefore practice *value-based organizing*. Yet, such an approach still pushes back on state power by prioritizing human connections and community well-being. Finally, I use Fred Moten's depiction of rent parties to argue that abolitionists can use frameworks that are controlled by the state to their benefit. By grounding their organizing in their values of community care, prison abolitionists can use state structures to reframe those same institutions to the well-being of the people. Through a practice of *value-based organizing*, they can use state authority to shift existing power dynamics, maintaining their agency.

The Modern Prison Abolition Movement

Allegra McLeod defines the prison abolition movement as one which seeks to "end the use of punitive policing and imprisonment as the primary means of addressing what are essentially social, economic, and political problems. Abolition aims at dramatically reducing reliance on incarceration and building the social institutions and conceptual frameworks that would render incarceration unnecessary."[25] The prison abolition movement does not have a definitive starting point, yet it can be traced back to the rise of scholarship critical of incarceration in the 1970's, such as Thomas Mathiesen's *The Politics of Abolition*. A defining moment in the movement was the formation of Critical Resistance, a leading prison abolitionist

[25] Allegra M. McLeod, "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice," *UCLA Law Review* 62, no. 1156 (2015): 1172.

organization, in 1997 by Angela Davis, Ruth Gilmore Wilson, Rose Braz and other activists.[26] In September 1998, Critical Resistance held a conference in the University of California, Berkeley, titled "Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex" in order to address the growth of the prison system, popularize the idea of the 'Prison Industrial Complex', and make abolition a practical theory of change.[27] While movements for prison abolition are present around the world, as demonstrated through the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA)[28], this thesis will largely focus on the prison abolition movement in the United States.

The core tenants of the prison abolition movement can be examined through a historical, material, and ideological lens. Many abolitionists in the United States are informed by the historical connection of policing to the slave patrols and later, the Ku Klux Klan; An abolitionist analysis argues that "racial legacies of incarceration and punitive policing infect these practices to their core by shaping the tolerated range of violence in criminal law enforcement contexts, as well as by coloring basic perceptions of and ideas about criminality and threat". This framework connects the development of present-day policing to laws such as 'Black Codes,' which treated petty crimes performed by African Americans after reconstruction as serious offenses.

This history of violence informs a structural analysis of the Prison Industrial Complex, exemplified in the racialized dimensions of policing and incarceration today. The killings of African Americans by white police officers and the over-incarceration of Black people highlight the racialized nature of the American criminal legal system today; in as late as the 1990's, some Los Angeles police officers still referred to cases involving young African Americans as "N.H.I"- an acronym for No Humans Involved- demonstrating that the intersection of

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[26] "History." Critical Resistance. Accessed December 23, 2021. http://criticalresistance.org/about/history/.
[27] "Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex 1998 Conference." Critical Resistance. Accessed December 23, 2021. http://criticalresistance.org/critical-resistance-beyond-the-prison-industrial-complex-1998-conference/.
[28] "ICOPA." Justice Action, June 9, 2021. https://justiceaction.org.au/icopa/.

dehumanization and policing are not practices of the past. From an abolitionist perspective, this analysis highlights ways in which U.S punitive practices developed through violence, degradation and racial subordination.[29]

Another historical analysis of the prison abolition movement is inspired by the abolition of slavery and W.E.B Du Bois' depiction of the reconstruction movement. He describes the failed promises made to Black Americans, introducing the term *abolition democracy* to state that "the abolition of slavery meant not simply abolition of legal ownership of the slave; it meant the uplift of slaves and their eventual incorporation into the body civil, politic, and social, of the United States."[30] Since then, scholars and activists have built on Du Bois' scholarship, presenting the criminal legal system as central to the brutal afterlife of slavery.[31] The failure to fundamentally restructure democratic norms and institutions- meaning, the failure to create an abolition democracy- inspires activists to present abolition as an unfinished project. This framework largely centers the positive elements of abolition, advocating for the development and implementation of "other positive substitutive social projects, institutions, and conceptions of regulating our collective social lives and redressing shared problems."[32] By doing so, the prison abolition movement makes tangible connections to the history of the reconstruction movement as a way to argue that creating new social structures is just as important as abolishing violent ones.

The prison abolition movement also sees prisons and policing as a way to use the idea of crime to maintain a capitalist order and expand state power. In *An Abolitionist Horizon for (Police) Reform,* Amna Akbar details how the state has divested from public infrastructures and

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[29] McLeod, "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice", 1185- 1187.

[30] W. E. B. Du Bois. *Black Reconstruction in America : Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Routledge, 2012). DOI: https://doi-org.proxy.mtholyoke.edu:2443/10.4324/9781315147413

[31] Saidiya Hartman. *Lose your mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Macmillan, 2008).

[32] McLeod, "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice", 1162- 1163

invested in police and prisons. Moreover, she argues that through policing, the state maintains a monopoly over crisis management, making imprisonment the state's primary response for social problems. She argues that "arrests and incarceration create barriers to housing, work, and benefits, creating yet another contradiction between prisons and basic needs." Akbar's materialist analysis demonstrates how the state uses criminalization and surveillance in order to protect capitalist social relations, not promote public safety.[33]

In *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California,* Scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore connects California's prison boom to a crisis in capitalism rather than a rising crime rate. She argues that prisons are "catchall solutions to social problems." The book demonstrates how the government used the threat of crime to enhance its legitimacy, presenting prison expansion as the ultimate solution for ongoing economic crises. Gilmore argues that by using a narrative of individual responsibility, both major political parties took the burden of providing a social safety net away from the government.[34] A materialist critique of incarceration presents the political factors that led to the expanding regulation of the state over marginalized communities, while simultaneously decreasing funding for welfare and other public services.

Ideologically, the prison abolition movement objects to a widespread individualist narrative, instead embracing one that highlights structural inequality and its historical roots. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten state that abolition is "not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the

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[33] Amna A. Akbar, "An Abolitionist Horizon for (Police) Reform," *California Law Review* 108, no. 6 (2020): 1821-1822

[34] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Prisons and Class Warfare: An Interview with Ruth Wilson Gilmore," Interview by Clement Petitjean, *Verso Books,* August 2nd 2018, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3954-prisons-and-class-warfare-an-interview-with-ruth-wilson-gilmore.

wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society."[35] Harney and Moten join a tradition of scholars who see abolition as more than just about the Prison Industrial Complex, but about a larger critique of society. Similarly to the framework of abolition democracy, this perspective seeks to address the root causes of harm, building new structures that will prevent it from occurring by addressing people's basic needs.

While the prison abolition movement advocates for the abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex, *penal abolition logic* rejects the underlying claim in which the criminal legal system responds to crime in a way that promotes safety or justice. It historicizes carceral practices as a tool of white supremacy and calls for their complete abolition.[36] In its core, *penal abolition logic* negates *carceral logic,* defined as "the control and punishment mindset that suggests criminalization is the best paradigm to organize human life and to solve social problems." The prevalence of carceral logic demonstrates that modern societies assume that threats, punishment, and imprisonment work as solutions to social problems. In addition, the framing of such logic often ignores the colonial, racial, and capitalist contexts in which the practices of policing and incarceration were invented. For prison abolitionists, carceral logic is why most individuals do not question the legitimacy of the Prison Industrial Complex. Carceral logic centers a "control-through-violence" framework, and touches almost every area of life; such framework governs thinking regarding private and social spaces; responses to fear, poverty, homelessness, mental illness, or difference of any kind. While some of carceral logic results in formal criminalization through the criminal legal system, carceral logic can be expressed in one's ideologies, practices,

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[35] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "The University and the Undercommons," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 42.
[36] Michael J. Coyle and Mechthild Nagel, Introduction to *Contesting Carceral Logics: Towards Abolitionists Futures,* ed. Michael J. Coyle and Mechthild Nagel (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 4.

and worldviews. The main definition to carceral logic is a punitive mindset aimed towards control; such mindset can, and often is, expressed outside of the criminal legal system.[37]

Unlike carceral logic, penal abolition logic separates harm and crime, acknowledging that what the state labels as crime is not always harmful, and that harmful acts are not always criminalized. In addition, penal abolition logic argues that as long as they do so equitably, communities have the right to define how they wish to live, including how they invest their resources and respond to harm. Penal abolition logic asks questions such as: "How do we equitably respond to all transgressions ('crimes') regardless of who their actors are? How do we identify and deliver remedial actions needed by all parties involved in transgressions?"[38] Penal abolition logic does not shy from accountability towards those that harmed others, yet it seeks to respond to harm in a way that will achieve justice and healing to all members of a community, and ideally, put structures in place that will prevent such harm from happening again.

Prison Reform vs Abolition

In *Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice,* Allegra McLeod introduces several ways in which an abolitionist ethic can be distinguished from a more reform-oriented approach. First, an abolitionist ideology identifies the dehumanization and violence of incarceration in the basic structure of penal practices in the United States. She argues that:

> Rather than understanding these features as more superficial flaws that might be repaired while holding constant the role of criminal law administration relative to other social regulatory projects, a critical abolitionist ethic centers on how caging or confining human beings in a hierarchically structured, depersonalizing environment developed through historical practices of overt racial subordination tends inherently toward violence and degradation.

[37] Coyle, Nagel, *Contesting Carceral Logics: Towards Abolitionists Futures*, 1-2.
[38] Coyle, Nagel, *Contesting Carceral Logics: Towards Abolitionists Futures*, 5.

Therefore, the practices that are core to the Prison Industrial Complex, such as regulating people through the threat of imprisonment, are inherently wrong and must be eliminated. Second, McLeod argues that the goal of abolition is disturbing the use of criminal law as a main regulatory framework, and replacing it with other forms. Reform, however, aims to only limit the scope or focus of criminal punishment. In addition, an abolitionist framework creates an opportunity for different actors and groups to address issues which are traditionally dealt with through the criminal legal system. While reformist approaches still heavily rely on state actors, the positive aspect of abolition focuses on empowering individuals and community members to create alternative ways to address their needs for security.[39]

A few notes on Language and Terminology

The Prison Industrial Complex: Critical Resistance defines the Prison Industrial Complex as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems." However, in this thesis, several terms are used to describe what many call *the criminal justice system:* such terms include, but are not limited to, the Prison Industrial Complex, the criminal legal system, the carceral state, and simply 'prisons and policing'. The overlap in terminology acknowledges the difficulty in defining the Prison Industrial Complex and its scope. Moreover, an unresolved tension is whether abolition is narrowly focused on prisons and police, or about the state as an entity. To reflect the diversity within the prison abolition movement, I use many of the terms mentioned above interchangeably. In general, I use such terms to refer to a system which involves police, jails, and prisons, as well as the judicial system, and their roles in society.

[39] McLeod, "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice", 1207- 1217.

However, I purposefully do **not** use the term *criminal justice system*, as I am not of the opinion that the criminal legal system provides any form of justice.[40]

The State: there are a variety of ways to define the state, with scholars never reaching a clear consensus. This project mainly uses *the state* in the context of Antonio Gramsci's theory of the state, which frames it as consisting of two levels: the political and civil society. He argues that "these two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the State and "juridical" government."[41] While the political society often includes political and legal institutions and the civil society is seen as the private sphere, there are often overlaps between them. For the purposes of this thesis, state engagement is mainly seen as what Gramsci defines as the political society. Yet, as will be further demonstrated later, the overlap between the political and civil society is crucial to my argument.

State Engagement vs State Interaction: This thesis discusses how organizers engage with the state and the institutions that represent it. As demonstrated in my thesis, state engagement occurs on various levels, and such engagement can be difficult to portray. When framing my argument, I choose to use the term "state engagement" in order to center the active participation of organizers in a process associated with a state institution or with institutional politics. However, when conducting my interviews, both my participants and I used the terms "state engagement" and "state interaction" interchangeably to imply any kind of activity that demonstrates association with the state.

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[40] Andrew Dilts, "Justice as Failure," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 13, no. 2 (2017): 186.
[41] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12.

Positionality: Sociological research often uses the language of *'insider'* and *'outsider'* to describe the researcher's relationship to the group they are investigating, with an insider belonging to the group they are researching, and an outsider- not. An insider might benefit from quicker access to participants and the ability to easily gain their trust. However, such a position might make it harder for the researcher to achieve neutrality. On the other hand, outsiders might find it easier to achieve neutrality and find comparative insights, but will struggle to achieve access and properly translate the cultural cues of their participants.[42] When considering such definitions, I would consider myself an insider in many ways, especially ideologically. I am a prison abolitionist, and have been organizing with abolitionist organizations- to some degree- for approximately 1.5 years. During my time as an activist, I faced many of the questions that this project asks. However, I would still consider myself to be an outsider to most of the experiences that my participants described, especially those regarding personal experiences with the criminal legal system. My position as an ideological insider has helped me contextualize the responses of my participants when interpreting them. Such a position is also significant as it explains why, in my writing, I often associate myself with the people I interviewed, the movement as a whole, and the tensions this project engages with. When I feel as if it is appropriate, I often use words such as "we" when discussing prison abolitionists: I do so to demonstrate that this project is not one I am detached from, and many of its implications are applicable to me and my future as an organizer.

[42] Cass Sever, "Longform Immersion: Situating Struggle as an In/Outsider." In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Poverty* (Routledge, 2021): 449.

Chapter One:

"I'll Believe It When I See It": State Violence and a Revolution of Values

How do prison abolitionists conceptualize the state? What shapes this understanding? To some extent, all of my participants saw the state, and especially the criminal legal system, as violent. This conceptualization largely came from personal interactions with state institutions or relationships they had. This chapter seeks to introduce the abolitionist framework for *value-based organizing*, arguing that it is largely influenced and shaped by state engagement. I argue that in many ways, state engagement allows the state to demonstrate its own pitfalls; the emotional and psychological impacts of such experiences shapes organizers' perception of the state and of society as a whole.[43] Such engagement helps organizers understand the necessity of abolition and as a result, embrace abolitionist values. After undergoing such transformation, organizers become heavily committed to such values, which I argue become a core part of their identities. By doing so, they become the primary concern of their organizing, and as a result, allow them to autonomously engage with state institutions. Therefore, state engagement is necessary for an abolitionist approach to *value-based organizing*.

First, I will introduce Boggs' et al *revolution of values*, which grounds social transformation in "a struggle between people with different sets of values, and decisions within people to live by one set of values rather than another".[44] I argue that this framework provides prison abolitionists with autonomy by conceptualizing social revolution around the power of the

[43] While state engagement shapes an abolitionist understanding of current social structures, an abolitionist vision for the future is framed around values of community care. Because an abolitionist vision is structured around abolitionist values, they can often be discussed in similar contexts. These similarities are noticeable in this chapter, as I engage with the concept of an abolitionist vision and of abolitionist values, depending on the appropriate context.

[44] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," in *Conversations in Maine: A New Edition*, ed. Michael Doan (University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 27.

people. I will then introduce French philosopher Louis Althussar's idea of *interpellation,* which demonstrates how members of society internalize the ideas of the ruling class. For prison abolitionists, *interpellation* is manifested in the internalization of *carceral logic,* an ideology that prioritizes punishment as the primary method to address harm.

I argue that the internalization of *carceral logic* is an obstacle to the revolution of values, yet direct experience with the Prison Industrial Complex allows one to overcome such obstacles by magnifying the emotional impact of state sanctioned violence. I will then argue that direct engagement with the Prison Industrial Complex is not only necessary to understand the violence of the state, but to incentivize abolitionist organizing. I then argue that understanding the full extent of state violence influences abolitionists to create their own vision for the future, founded on values of care. Therefore, state engagement allows prison abolitionists to go through an internal *revolution of values* and devote themselves to an abolitionist care ethic.

I will then introduce Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's analysis of institutional engagement, used in their essay *the University and the Undercommons.* I will argue that it is impossible to apply their concepts of refusal and 'negligence' to the state. Yet, the impossibility of refusal allows one to understand how *value based organizing* complements Boggs' et al *revolution of values* and the agency that it provides; I argue that while a *revolution of values* provides abolitionists with agency over the foundational values of society, *value-based organizing* provides a framework for abolitionists to maintain such autonomy while engaging with the state. By doing so, they center their authority in a more practical way.

Finally, I will argue that while Boggs et al promoted the idea of internal transformation through a *revolution of values*, once organizers go through such transformation, they ground themselves in their shared values, using them for guidance. Through such understanding of the

world, their abolitionist values become the core framework for their activism. Such understanding is a crucial element of *value-based organizing,* allowing for activists to engage with the state despite the possibility of reinforcing its legitimacy.

A Revolution of Values

In *Changing Ourselves,* Boggs et al draw a distinction between a rebellion and a revolution, stating that a revolution does not just deal with the injustice of the past- it must involve a new stage in the evolution of mankind.[45] They highlight the significance of internal struggle and reflection as a way to understand how one was dominated by different ways of thinking.[46] For them, politics is foremost a *process*, "a method of social action and decision-making that involves the organization of society and of the institutions responsible for the organization of society." Therefore, part of the evolution of mankind, or what they call the concept of a new man, involves a reframing of the relationships between people and institutions. The underlying logic of their argument is that people, not the government, hold power over society. This power comes from the people's ability to determine, define, and reconceptualize our core ideas and values.[47] Therefore, society's attitude towards institutions is what provides them with power and legitimacy, or lack thereof.

However, it is important to understand Boggs' et al ideas within a structural context. Before Boggs et al, Martin Luther King Jr. called for a "radical revolution of values," critiquing the system of capitalism and the ways in which it incentives one to prioritize profit over people. Within that framework, what we value "is largely dependent upon its movement through cycles

[45] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," in *Conversations in Maine: A New Edition,* ed. Michael Doan (University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 26.
[46] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," 28.
[47] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," 30.

of accumulation and absorption."[48] In the context of the Prison Industrial Complex, certain people are seen as more deserving of resources, while others are deemed disposable, and therefore deserving of incarceration. King also called for a "people-oriented society,"[49] highlighting the relationship between systems and values; for true social transformation, there must be a change in both the foundational structures of society, and the values that guide it.

Yet, even within a structural context, Boggs' et al framework is future oriented and empowering. While such a framework is not purely individual, it provides a narrative, one which individual organizers can follow and ground themselves. It centers on the idea that there isn't a singular understanding of society. Therefore, Boggs et al challenge their readers to see society as evolving, arguing that a revolution is an effort of the people to discover or create new guiding framework or values, and therefore is full of uncertainty.[50] Instead of attempting to alter society by proving why one's opinions are already true, they center the people's authority over the values that structure society. By doing so, they argue that when we discover and build new social values- both in ourselves and in others- true social transformation will occur. These ideas are crucial to both the prison abolition movement and to the narratives I seek to uplift; time after time, the organizers I interviewed sought agency, demanding authority over the values, policies, and practices that controlled their lives.

State Violence, Interpellation and Carceral Logic

Every member of society unknowingly upholds its social structure, which is regulated by the state to further the ideologies of the powerful. In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,*

[48] Jared Loggins and Andrew J. Douglas. *Prophet of Discontent: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Critique of Racial Capitalism*. University of Georgia Press, 2021.
[49] King, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," 214.
[50] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," 48.

French Philosopher Louis Althusser introduces the reader to the Repressive and Ideological State Apparatus. Both function by violence and ideology: the former operates primarily by repression and is ideologically supported; the latter functions inversely.[51] Ideological State Apparatuses are crucial to what he calls *interpellation*, arguing that "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals… or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects."[52] By constantly encountering the values and norms that are dominant in society, ideology is used as a tool for individuals to become complicit in their own regulation; because these institutions are common features of society, such as schools and religious institutions, they serve as ways to reproduce the ideologies of the ruling class. This process is a continuous one, in which individuals internalize the roles and beliefs dictated to them.

Althussar's concept of *interpellation* demonstrates the states' loyalty to those in power: until a new society is formed, the state will continue to promote the ideologies of the ruling class. Currently, prison abolitionists see our current society as one that is structured to promote the internalization of what they call *carceral logic*, an ideology that centers punishment in most areas of life. This framework practiced by the state provides a holistic analysis to its nature and the damage inflicted by the Prison Industrial Complex. If the state is conceptualized as a contributor to a punitive society, even if only through *interpellation,* then actively attempting to dismantle the logic that makes it so is a form of state engagement. An opposition to carceral logic is a way of engaging with the ideas of the state, even if one does not perceive that as such. Therefore, all forms of abolitionist organizing should be seen as a degree of state engagement.

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[51] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)," In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 80.
[52] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)," 86.

The concept of *interpellation* challenges much of the autonomy that a *revolution of values* provides. Boggs et al portray the future as constantly evolving; without a static understanding of society, the people are provided with power to shape its underlying values. Such power was demonstrated in my interviewees' approach to their work, seeing themselves as able to push against the status quo surrounding crime and harm. Yet, the narrative of agency that *a revolution of values* provides stands at odds with the influence of *interpellation*. When discussing both Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses, Althussar writes that "the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions, beneath the ruling ideology, which is the ideology of "the ruling class."[53] Both directly and indirectly, our socialization is heavily influenced by the desires of the ruling class. Because everyone is influenced by the process of *interpellation,* any change in the fundamental values that structure society is shaped by the motives of the ruling class. Therefore, there is no guarantee that any of such values will protect the marginalized, or even resemble a sense of justice. This is demonstrated in a common acknowledgment within the prison abolition movement which states that even prison abolitionists themselves have internalized carceral logic.

Stories of Personal Experience

I'm an abolitionist, the way I got introduced to being an activist in the community is because my dad was incarcerated when I was a child, and my mom was incarcerated when I was a young adult. So just understanding the obstacles and the trauma that prisons and jails not only have [done] to the people that are currently incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, but also the children and the families that also have to take on that burden. I mean, that's a big part of where

[53] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)," In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 81.

poverty comes from- communities being disrupted by breadwinners being plucked out of the community and then being traumatized when they go back- and often just being literally unable to find legal work because they have a record, you know. The way this thing is set up, you know, could not be further from the pretense of rehabilitation. So what we're telling people is that it's not just about removing an entity that is highly harmful to the community, but rather taking away the resources that they have because clearly those resources haven't proven effective.[54]

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In my interviews, all of my participants had some kind of personal experience with the Prison Industrial Complex and were influenced by such interactions. For some, such experiences were deeply personal. Coming from communities that experienced a disproportionate amount of policing and surveillance, those participants did not see the criminal legal system as one which effectively protected them. In other situations, participants gained an understanding of the criminal legal system through their activism: examples included participating in demonstrations and building relationships with incarcerated individuals. For most participants, the harm caused by the criminal legal system conveyed the impacts of state sanctioned violence in a way that outweighed institutional forms of knowledge. While academic research has been done on many topics related to the Prison Industrial Complex, participants rarely discussed studies or academic research. Regardless of their experiences, responses demonstrated that participants saw the criminal legal system as not only ineffective in addressing harm, but as brutal and destructive.

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You know, I have just seen how much harm is done in the prison system over and over again, for years, with the way it affects families and just how cruel it is and how the people who

[54] Narrative: State Violence. See Appendix B.

they consider worth killing are people who were horribly abused, and just normal people without resources. When people are in prison, I don't think they are any worse or better or more or less likely to do harm than all the rest of us. It's more about who gets targeted for incarceration. However, it feels like people think [that] when someone's put in prison, now they can't hurt anyone. Well, no, now they can just hurt a very specific population of people that they're all trapped with. It's easy to be disappeared as a prisoner, it's certainly easy to get the shit beaten out of you and be thrown in solitary for a decade, or whatever, for whatever reasons that they can justify or fabricate so there's no recourse basically. There's times where we've seen officers treat women that's inside in very degrading ways. Cursing at them… and your human side is screaming, but if you say something that could be- all it will take is that officer to go say something to administration and then your organization is no longer [able] to come inside.[55]

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Participants' rejection of the Prison Industrial Complex's ability to properly address harm illuminated how engagement with the state provides a structural analysis of the Prison Industrial Complex. Organizers' ideologies saw the Prison Industrial Complex as one that is violent and harmful, yet their engagement with the state provided tangible evidence to serve such narratives. While any person can educate themselves on the policies that govern the prison system, state engagement is a tangible avenue for one to see how such policies are enacted on the ground. At times, such close engagement with the Prison Industrial Complex made participants acknowledge the disconnect between the law and one's lived reality. They saw how the power of the state provided it with full control over many marginalized communities, control that was difficult to undermine. Organizers often faced difficult decisions, especially when they were

[55] Narrative: State Violence. See Appendix B.

forced to engage with the state in order to promote the well-being of incarcerated individuals. Not only did they see it as a system that disproportionately targets certain populations, but their engagement with it cemented their belief that the Prison Industrial Complex centers punishment and control, even if policy makers attempt to incorporate rehabilitative aspects into it.

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[And] the more that I'm involved in organizing and showing up and building my own practice and solidarity, the more I build relationships with folks who have had experience in the system, who have had a loved who have had experience in the system, and the more you learn about how that system works and how fucked up, it really is- just writing to many hundreds of incarcerated folks and having a sense of the lived experience of those folks- and so I think just the experience of being in the movement, being in the trenches, doing the work, is probably what has the greatest impact on my ideology or how I approach my work.[56]

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Boggs et al portray a revolutionist as one who "begins by wanting to create ever higher forms of human values; ever more mutually respecting relations between people."[57] State engagement allows for a *revolution of values* not despite the role of the state, but because of it. While state engagement could reinforce the legitimacy of harmful institutions, at times such measures are necessary, as it is crucial that activists see abolition as more than a theoretical project. Direct engagement with the Prison Industrial Complex allows abolitionists to understand abolition as a real necessity, caused by harms done to real human beings; an important framework to guide them when practicing *value-based organizing*. When doing so, they

[56] Narrative: Relationships. See Appendix H.
[57] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," 87.

understand that in order to dismantle structures of oppression one must combat the values that present it as valid; interacting with those who are oppressed by the state allows one to do so.

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And then also just being a young woman in the community, and understanding the different obstacles that we have to overcome and endure everyday living in a community that is over policed and just deeply incarcerated. I mean, even just as a young woman, as a mom, just taking a left turn sometimes without using a blinker, you're subject to being pulled over, and possibly, just [being] mistreated, belittled, dehumanized just because you took a left turn and so you know all those things cause more harm. Police who are literally doing nothing for the community are getting paid half a million dollars, just to patrol our streets and terrorize our community right, and so what we're saying is- if you can give us a fraction of that money, what we can then do as an alternative is ensure that these young people that might be committing crimes of poverty, have an avenue, right, have universal income, have access to education, so that they don't have to resort to the things that they're resorting to now just to survive on the streets, right?[58]

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In many situations, participants' personal experiences served as a catalyst for their organizing. Just like Boggs et al and King's *revolution of values,* participants saw the relationship between the structural violence caused by the Prison Industrial Complex, and the values that facilitate such systems. However, the violence of the Prison Industrial Complex does not mean that the state cannot be transformed. Participants' conceptualization of the state as

[58] Narrative: State Violence. See Appendix B.

violent often translated into their vision for the future, one where they fix the state's wrongdoings. Therefore, seeing the violence of the state can provide one with a sense of urgency that motivates their work; such motivation shows how state engagement can energize activists to reframe the existing system to one that is grounded on the values they wish to advance.

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The idea of prison was supposed to be rehabilitation, and that's not it at all, it's a system of degradation and humiliation, and so I remember those times, and that's what gives me the strength to keep going, like- 'this is needed, I know you're tight, and it's 12 o'clock at night, and you got up at six o'clock in the morning, but it's needed, and one day we're going to be where we want to be, and this will all be worth it.'[59]

Can We Refuse the State?

In their famous essay *the University and the Undercommons,* Stefano Harney and Fred Moten present a dual analysis of the University, where it is a space one experiences both discovery and injustice. On the one hand, the existence of the University depends on 'enlightenment style-critiques,' which are framed as a critical engagement with ideas that shape our society. Yet, Harney and Moten argue that the University will never truly be radical. This same critical education creates a labor force that does not challenge capitalism, but reproduces it. *The Undercommons of Enlightenment* allows for a nuanced understanding of the obstacles surrounding institutional criticism, both in the academy and the prison abolition movement. A core element of Harney and Moten's argument lies in their recognition of what they call the 'negligence of professionalization,' where the academic is critical of the University yet in reality,

[59] Narrative: State Violence. See Appendix B.

does so in a professionalized manner, and therefore participates in its logic.[60] This concept of negligence is emblematic of the abolitionist fear of co-optation, in which state engagement might unintentionally strengthen the carceral system. Many abolitionists argue that the state will never admit to its current violent infrastructure: it is willing to reform its institutions, but never to acknowledge the carceral logic it advances. Often, the state will promote a more humane or cost effective punishment system, measures which abolitionists often agree with as short-term goals. Yet, such reforms often promote the underlying punitive logic of the Prison Industrial Complex. The alignment between the state and some of abolitionists' short-term goals can be seen as a potential threat to abolitionist efforts; if abolitionists cooperate with the state to advance such goals, their long-term goals might be taken over or misconstrued.

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In 2018, I supported solidarity efforts with the National Prison Strike and befriended incarcerated abolitionists who had been punished for participating in the strike [like] my friend who was put in solitary for 18 months for one email he sent suggesting the value of work stoppages. It is so hard to see.. that position where [incarcerated people are] talked to in a certain way, and [they] can't say anything in fear [of] lockdown, taken to the hole or whatever term people use for getting put in a totally different jail cell inside a prison. But yeah, a lot of times [you have to do] a lot of biting your tongue and turning your head away and then, once it's over, going to speak to the person try to lift them back up. It just kind of feels like nonsense to me because [incarceration] doesn't limit the harm, it's just like enclosing a bunch of people in a

[60] Harney, Moten, "The University and the Undercommons," 39.

tight space together and then dehumanizing them, and then punishing them when they don't necessarily act upon their best instincts and who would after being tortured?[61]

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While the *undercommons of enlightenment* provides useful insights regarding state engagement, its analysis of negligence is insufficient when examining the state as an active perpetrator of violence. While the dangers of co-optation are significant, the cruelty that results from its underlying logic demonstrates that the state is more than just 'negligent.' Therefore, the necessity to engage with it, as well as the dangers, are much larger. The necessity, as state engagement is the easiest, most effective way to mitigate its harms. The dangers it brings, as prison abolitionists can risk actively supporting carceral logic simply by engaging with the state. While abolitionists should be consistent with their long-term goals, it is impossible to engage with the state without some degree of co-optation. The state, in its current form, predominantly supports carceral logic, and prison abolitionists must engage with it to reduce its harm. Therefore, association with the state involves linking oneself to carceral logic. Prison abolitionists should never embrace carceral logic, yet they should acknowledge their role in reproducing the Prison Industrial Complex. Only then, they can properly engage in *value based organizing*: centering their values, and therefore combating the punitive logic that is in its foundation. Understanding the impact of state power on abolitionist organizing does not mean a loss of agency. Rather, it allows one to engage with it in both a practical and empowering manner.

[61] Narrative: State Violence. See Appendix B.

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Also, I feel like… police are supposed to be here to protect and serve, and through my experiences, the only community that police are protecting and serving is white communities or communities that have more financial stability. And then, the only place that they police is the black and brown communities or the cash poor communities and so that's a problem to me- now that I'm a mother, I work really hard to kind of create community-lead alternatives that don't include systems that cause more harm because it's really important for my daughter's future. [And] they (the police) have no consequences right, but yet their mistakes cause a lifetime of trauma, and so I think that, for me, that's where I talk about it- it's not just about this idea that 'oh the police are bad because I myself am a criminal and I come from a history of criminality', but rather I don't have faith and trust in this entity, an organization that is rooted in its history of slave catchers right and the slave patrol.[62]

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Many of my interviews demonstrated the stakes of state engagement: especially when discussing the carceral system, participants acknowledged not only the violence of the state, but the impact that it had on them as organizers. Organizers' personal experiences meant that they saw it as almost impossible to refuse the state, and therefore the concept of "negligence" as inapplicable to the Prison Industrial Complex. Moreover, they saw the significance in directly engaging with the most harmful elements of the state; as the state holds complete control over the people abolitionists spend most of their time advocating for- incarcerated individuals- state engagement was used as a way to gain some kind of control over the hegemonic narrative. Whether by supporting prisoner strikes or visiting correctional facilities, state engagement is an

[62] Narrative: State Violence. See Appendix B.

opportunity for abolitionists to insert their agency by reducing the harm of the state as much as they can.

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There's that need to constantly like… imagine what we're building toward for the future, so that we are actually practicing those new ways of being with one another, so that we're not… Just kind of perpetuating the behaviors, the culture, whatever the status quo. So we have to foreground care everywhere… Care is the best, or a very tangible, way to combat capitalist and carceral logic. How does that show up? So doing organizing in the traditional sense… then also community care- how do we care for each other, how do we work in the moment to make prisons and the State obsolete by building up the networks that we need to care for each other, right now.[63]

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Harney and Moten's analysis is one that problematizes the logic of the University, and sees refusing to it as a form of political activity. They challenge the modes of organization of the University, questioning the implications of "refus[ing] to call others to order, refus[ing] interpellation and the reinstantiation of the law."[64] Yet, refusing to comply with the state is much harder than refusing to comply with the University. Prison abolitionists cannot refuse the logic of the state in the same way the Harney and Moten refuse the logic of the University; the state has more power, and more lives are at stake. Those in the undercommons do not want the "acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken

[63] Narrative: Values of Care. See Appendix C.
[64] Jack Halberstam, Introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 9.

and b) that we deserved to be the broken part;"[65] Just like with the University, state engagement is a reciprocal relationship; recognizing the state and its authority means complying to its standards. Therefore, state engagement creates a hierarchy that prioritizes political frameworks that the state chooses to recognize. Yet, by centering the values that they wish to see, prison abolitionists are resisting the notion that state engagement means a commitment to the values that the state currently upholds. By doing so, they reframe state engagement as an opportunity: depending on one's approach, they could reinforce the legitimacy of the state or promote their own vision.

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What we are proposing, what we want to happen instead, what we are building while we destroy, is not some new thing for the government to do, but rather our communal processes of resource-sharing, skillsharing, joy-making, direct communication, mutual support, and keeping each other safe. If two people are available to each other, you know, for mutual aid, and if those people are mindful of each other's needs and if they're building community and if they're building community with everyone that they can reach-- there's a solidity and a stability to that, as trivial as it is. I am nothing without the people who care for me, the earth that sustains me. I literally would not be alive.[66]

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In *Changing Ourselves,* Boggs et al compare a vision to a painting, defining it as what may be portrayed, but never has been. They state that "a vision raises your sights, gives you a feeling of what might be."[67] In their interviews, participants often positioned their values within

[65] Jack Halberstam, Introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 6.
[66] Narrative: Values of Care. See Appendix C.
[67] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," 41.

the larger framework of long-term abolition; not only did they see the state as a violent agent, but they had a clear understanding of the society that they wanted to see. While none of them mentioned an explicit conceptual framework such as a *revolution of values,* they were empowered by their ability to reshape social priorities and values. Such an imaginative approach demonstrates how *value-based organizing* reinforces Boggs' et al notion that people have agency over the concepts that are the foundational basis of society. Such ideas demonstrate the crucial component of agency when interacting with the state. The vision that organizers held motivated them to push back on the legitimacy of the Prison Industrial Complex, even if they had subconscious ideas influenced by the dominant class.

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I think one of the functions of prisons is to isolate people and to destroy families and just to destroy community. So to reject that logic and to be like 'no, we're going to make sure that folks are able to remain members of their community, that they're important members of my community, of our communities, and to have those connections and make sure that people have the resources to make those connections' definitely feels like an abolitionist goal. A lot of things go on inside of the jails and the prisons and they really don't care about that people- somebody has to care. Regardless of what that person did or what's really going on- the real reason for them being there- because as an abolitionist, I don't believe in punishment as an appropriate channel to pursue when a harm has happened, or a mistake has happened, or a law is broken, whatever it is…. We can have true liberation by growing and understanding the value of every single human life.[68]

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[68] Narrative: Values of Care. See Appendix C.

In the interviews I conducted, participants grounded their activism in the values of love and care- especially for members of their community, but also towards society as a whole. Boggs et al present the values that shape our social structures as relative, and that in order to make a revolution, one must discard the notion that any prior knowledge is certain or permanent. They argue that "There is no proof really that the road you are taking is the "true" one. You have to make it true."[69] Yet, once organizers became committed to abolitionist values, they became convinced that their commitment will not change. Such conviction demonstrates how values can become a source of authority and certainty, especially as organizers engage in flexible modes of activism. In the end, these sentiments demonstrate a more practical connection between one's values and their activism. By grounding themselves in their values, and seeing them as part of their identity, organizers had a tangible connection between their ideology and actions, regardless of the amount of state engagement they did. This demonstrates how *value based organizing*, which centers ones' values or framework, is a practical method to engage with the state. As prison abolition is a long term goal that necessitates state engagement, personal values allow one to maintain their autonomy in the process.

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When I'm talking about the abolitionist movement, I'm talking about it in the context of the love and care that I have for [the] community… The work that I'm doing is because I genuinely love and care for my community, for POC people, for Black and brown solidarity. The only people I'm going to cater to in that way is the people- like, the people that I'm accountable to- incarcerated people, poor people, disabled people. That's what drives my work. So when I identify a harmful source, most of the time, which is the police department and white supremacy,

[69] Boggs et al, "Changing Ourselves," 48.

my work is not led by hatred towards them, because at the end of the day I don't hate these people, I don't know these people. I can always go back to that- I'm with Black people, with incarcerated people, with poor people, and I'm with working people. [So while] a lot of people think about this work [as] very black and white, very us versus them, I think that it's a little bit more complicated than that. It's not just 'Fuck the police' it's not that, right? It's yes, 'Fuck the police' and 'my community needs access to adequate housing'. So the answer to the question, I think- if it benefits the community, or to protect the community, those are the times that I will interact with the state.[70]

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While *value-based organizing* is grounded in values, they were often shaped and influenced by state engagement, a necessary process to obstruct the process of *interpellation.* State engagement that recognizes the humanity of incarcerated people directly counters hegemonic narratives regarding criminality, justice, harm, and accountability*;* by doing so, it presents a paradox: while engaging with the state, individuals begin to question its underlying punitive norms. Therefore, in order to begin and doubt the carceral design of the state, one must first engage with it and reinforce its legitimacy. Advocating for individual prisoners, even if it means engaging with the state, ensures that incarcerated people are not seen as invisible, and therefore, disposable. Such practices can be seen in participatory defense campaigns[71], which abolitionist Mariame Kaba argues should connect people in a personal manner, providing activists with a better understanding of the brutality of prisons.[72] Not only was state engagement

[70] Narrative: Values of Care. See Appendix C.
[71] Participatory defense campaigns are grassroot efforts to pressure authorities, organize popular support for prisoner releases, and attend to prisoner needs.
[72] Mariame Kaba, "Free us all: Participatory Defense Campaigns as Abolitionist Organizing," The New Inquiry, May 8th, 2017. https://thenewinquiry.com/free-us-all/

highly influential on organizers' values and ideology, but it allowed those who had not been directly impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex to build solidarity with those who were and still are. Therefore, by combating one's internalization of carceral logic, *value-based organizing* provides a way for abolitionists to advance an abolitionist vision even if they reinforce the legitimacy of the state in the short term.

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I think in community and movement building, you have to go as a coalition, you know, together- and it's already strength in numbers. A big thing is the concept of Participatory Defense where you bring in family and friends to help with the defense of somebody who's been caught in the system, and you might not think that the person should even been arrested to begin with, or that the law was unjust or whatever, but at the same time, you're participating in that process… Organizing is about telling stories. It's about, I guess, maybe pulling heartstrings to get some understanding about what it is that your stance is in this fight. [And] through that really then, finding a solution to the needs that our community is really- you know- asking for.[73]

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[73] Narrative: Agency. See Appendix E.

Chapter Two:

Redefining Democracy: Claiming Authority and Securing Rights

The state has a monopoly over our institutional processes and establishments.[74] Prisons, jails, and the police are agents of the state, bound to uphold the law, yet the authority of the state is not confined to the criminal legal system. From school committees to state legislatures to the US senate; government agencies, task forces on public safety, and the Supreme Court; the state holds power over any entity that impacts our lives in a meaningful way. Its monopoly over formal institutional processes largely restricts abolitionists to state engagement, especially when attempting to mitigate the harm of the carceral system. Yet, even though prison abolitionists are confined by the power of the state, an abolitionist vision, and the way such vision manifests through *value-based organizing,* demonstrates the ways in which the state does not have a monopoly over what people see as essential democratic values.

While the meaning of democracy is contested, it is usually associated with the selection of government officials by universal suffrage. In addition, liberalism is commonly associated with constitutional and limited government, the rule of law, and the protection of individual rights. Together, such systems are 'liberal democracies,' and are often referred to simply as democracies.[75] Therefore, the dominant depiction of a democracy largely centers processes that are controlled by the state. However, this ideology is not without exception, nor is it permanent. The ways in which abolitionists choose to engage with the state, while constrained by its power, allows us to ask: does the state have a monopoly over *how we define the democratic process, or democracy as a whole?*

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[74] Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation" in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mtholyoke/detail.action?docID=1111791.
[75] Marc F. Plattner, "From Liberalism to Liberal Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 121-134. doi:10.1353/jod.1999.0053

First, I introduce Saidiya Hartman's concept of *the Chorus*, which allows for a conceptualization of a collective and shared experience during the time of state violence and persecution. I argue that organizers' sense of community belonging provides them with purpose and allows them to reframe state engagement as an act of care. In addition, I argue that activists' community membership allows them to see their lived experience as a source of authority, conceptualizing state engagement as an expression of agency. Then, I argue that organizers see state engagement as a method of resistance, as it allows them to push back on the status quo and advocate for their communities.

Lastly, I introduce Dorothy Roberts' *Abolition Constitutionalism*, an essay which provides an analysis of the relationship between the prison abolition movement and the US Constitution. I use Roberts' framework to argue that state engagement can be used as a method for one to autonomously secure their own rights. I demonstrate how organizers use state engagement as a way to make larger claims to the state and the public regarding the worth of their communities, an additional expression of agency. Such conceptualization highlights the ways in which *value based organizing* is grounded in values of care and peoplehood, allowing for state engagement in a way that deprioritizes it. Therefore, state engagement can be conceptualized in a way that diminishes state power.

Community Survival

In their interviews, participants saw collaboration with the state through a realistic perspective. For them, it was a practical strategy: they acknowledged the power that the state holds and sought to use it to achieve their goals. Participants considered not only the benefits that could come from state engagement, but its complete monopoly over institutions and

establishments. Such considerations were heightened when discussing community members who were incarcerated or under some form of state control; in such situations, engagement with the state was more than a practical necessity, but a struggle for survival. While the state holds monopoly over all forms of institutional politics, participants recognized that the enforcement mechanisms of the criminal legal system meant that the state has control over their loved one's livelihood and well being. Organizers prioritized *their people* over any ideology they held regarding state engagement. They did not care if they reinforced the legitimacy of the state, or even the criminal legal system, if that meant that they would be able to support those they felt like needed it the most.

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Power is really concentrated in lawmakers right, I mean-- the ways that they pass legislation. Sure, it's reinforcing the legitimacy of the State, but also, I guess, to me, I don't see it as a realistic short-term goal anytime soon that we're going to delegitimize the city government, I just don't think it's going anywhere, so it seems sort of pointless to me to bank on or ignore them as a tool to try to influence in the short term. With legislation, if orgs are going to support or endorse legislation, or lobby for or against city budgets, it requires some level of involvement with state officials, just because the State currently has a monopoly on legislation and budgeting. Being an organizer, it's about building power, and doing work for the community. You need to be in touch with any and everybody that have something to do with providing resources to the community for our people to be stable. [And] when you're on parole, you have to work with the state. The agent has to come to your house and check your house, they do have to piss test you…. Even with [our] reentry group, they have to make sure they follow their parole stipulations to stay out. If they don't follow those stipulations they will go back. So in those situations, we see it

being okay to work with their parole agents who are, quote unquote 'the state' to keep them out of prison.[76]

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While acknowledging the power the state holds, organizers saw themselves as members of *a community:* a concept they never explicitly defined, yet its meaning was clear to them and their peers. For many, their community provided them a sense of belonging, one which they represented in an almost familial way. Through the concept of community, they expanded the traditional notions of a social movement, which often includes lengthy campaigns, public actions, and distinct group displays.[77] Their community guided them while engaging with the state, and centered them in their long-term vision. Participants saw community in more than just the movement; it was the people they cared for, those who often see abolition as a struggle for survival. That purpose can allow abolitionists to see state engagement as an act of care, not just a burden. The benefits that come from providing support to members of their collective, even if temporary, outweighed their reluctance to reinforce state power.

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[And state officials are] the ones that we can get a lot of inside information from, so I think we have to engage with them to get really the bigger picture to get what we want. [For example,] this past Mother's Day we did a Black mama bailout... So I really was shooting my shot when I thought I was calling a jail to see, if I could get some information or even get them on a phone call, but there was a caseworker who actually had all three of the women on her load and she called me back the same day, and was like 'hey, I think it's so dope you know that y'all are trying to bail these three women out, you know, I want to cry because they really don't

[76] Narrative: Government. See Appendix D.
[77] Charles Tilly, *Social Movements 1768-2004,* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 3.

belong in here.' And she was like 'so I'm going to try and have them call you, so be by your phone because they're going to call you and then they'll tell you what they need, and if they can have a place to go or whatever they need they'll tell you.' And so I was like 'okay cool' and she sure enough, all three of those women call me. And we were able to bail them out and provide them with their needs. And that might be a once in a lifetime thing, because when I told our family, our movement family, I was like 'yeah they called me back and they let the three women call.' They was like 'what? you are able to call them?!' and I'm like 'yeah I never knew I could do that.' They was like 'you can't do that! I don't even know how you did that!' and I'm just like 'Oh, okay,' but you know, it was a really cool moment that I appreciated that the woman actually helped me, you know, bail out the three Black mamas. [So] even with the prison we do keep relationships open and you do have some people say 'hey try this' or, 'this is the best time to ask for this' or 'yeah not today, it says it's not gonna happen' or 'yeah he's never going to approve that'. So we put on the smiles and we just say what we need to say to get the information that we need to get to keep us moving in our direction we're trying to go.[78]

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Participants saw their community membership as one that provided them with a unique perspective that legislators and other decision makers did not have; their sense of collectivity gave them knowledge and expertise, one that gave them a specific kind of credibility. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, Saidiya Hartman uses the concept of *the Chorus* to describe a unique and collective experience, one of shared lived reality which only those who participate in can understand:

[78] Narrative: Government. See Appendix D.

> One girl can stand in for any of them, can serve as the placeholder for the story, recount the history from the beginning, convey the knowledge of freedom disguised as jargon and nonsense. Few understand them, study them like they are worth something, realize their inherent value. If you listen closely, you can hear the whole world in a bent note, a throwaway lyric, a singular thread of the collective utterance. Everything from the first ship to the young woman found hanging in her cell. Marvel at their capacity to inhabit every woman's grief as their own. All the stories ever told rush from her opened mouth.[79]

In her novel, Hartman tells the stories of Black women between 1890 and 1935, using the technique coined as 'Critical Fabulation.'[80] She portrays their understanding of a world where they were forced to create their own structures of support, as no one would provide it for them. The chorus allows the reader to understand the relationship between Black women living during such times and the state, one which is defined by experiences of pain and survival. The organizers that I interviewed saw their community membership as a priority; by prioritizing people over institutions in their engagement, they not only prioritized their values, but demonstrated how doing so was an expression of autonomy. When discussing state engagement, either through voting, advising institutional processes, or running for office, participants pushed back on the status quo by centering the thoughts and experiences of their community members, people who were often kept in the margins. By doing so, they began to reimagine state engagement and its purpose.

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We had an elder that was shot and robbed- he owns a business here- and he said that he didn't want the kid to go to prison, he wanted him to get help. And recognizing that the

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[79] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2019), 345.

[80] Critical Fabulation is a style of creative semi-nonfiction that attempts to bring the suppressed voices of the past to the surface by combining hard research, facts, and storytelling. Hartman often uses it as a response to the lack of representation of Black women in historical texts.

community said, this person who was the victim said, that they don't want him to go to jail, [he was sent] to jail anyway, regardless of what the community want[ed]. Some of the work I do now is restorative justice… It'll be great to get that involved here. In partnership with the District Attorney, so instead of sending people to jail and prison, we will be able to send people to a program that will create a restorative effect for the person who caused the harm and who was the victim of the harm. Basically, we're trying to get the community and help the community and that's much better than just locking people up.[81]

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The chorus demonstrates the power of collectivity and lived experience. On the one hand, by virtue of being in the chorus, the women see the pain, joy and complexities of their community members; they understand it as if it was their own. Hartman writes about a time in which members of the chorus- Black, often queer, women- are a constant target of state violence, and use the chorus not only for survival, but as a means for community care. During such times, the chorus was a mode of empowerment, but also a necessity: Hartman writes that "in the deepest darkest recess of an opaque song, it is clear that life is at stake."[82] Yet, today, collectivity might provide additional benefits. When organizers are able to provide knowledge based on their mutual, lived experience, it is possible that no one else can deliver such knowledge out of the space of the chorus and into where decisions with tangible, material, consequences are made.

When lives are at stake, as highlighted by Hartman, the perspectives of community members- those in the chorus- could be crucial to mitigate the harm caused by the Prison Industrial Complex and prevent further state violence. Many of the activists I interviewed saw

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[81] Narrative: Agency. See Appendix E.

[82] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2019), 345.

power in their lived experience and wanted to engage with the state in order to properly advocate for their communities. Participants often saw their community membership as providing them with authority, recognizing that while they will often engage with the state *for* their people, they will never *rely on it* to understand them and their needs.

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I thought it was time to try to make a change and show people that, you know, that things can be different… So I hit the ground running. I came out, you know, fighting for the people. I wanted to be the voice for the people that I've seen, people- marginalized folks- post their head, neck, before even going to jail, out on the street. They all said the same thing: they needed resources, you know, nice income that was livable, affordable housing, [or just] housing, period. Substance use treatment, mental health [treatment], and all those things you can't get inside of a prison or jail. And so you know, we have our infrastructure of reimagining communities which literally [it's] like building that village out back into the communities that are most impacted by incarceration.[83]

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It is difficult to conceptualize the concept of the chorus in a time in which the state actively seeks the input of marginalized communities.[84] As a collective space formed largely through the consequences of state violence, one might wonder if it is possible to be a member of the chorus while engaging with the state. In addition, the chorus is inherently mutual and embraces reciprocity: if only one person attempts to represent the experience of the chorus, its sense of collectivity might be lost. If such concerns are substantiated, then once one engages

[83] Narrative: Agency. See Appendix E.

[84] When referring to the state's requests for input, I am referring to cases in which state institutions or elected officials request activists or members of marginalized communities to serve in an advisory capacity, such as committee members. Participants were asked about their willingness to participate in such roles in their interviews.

with the state, they lose the benefits of chorus membership, and their voice is no longer beneficial to their community. Hartman writes that "few understand them [members of the chorus], study them like they are worth something, realize their inherent value."[85] Participants' community membership demonstrated a dedication not only to their peers' needs, but to their worth. Participants often saw state engagement as a way for one to insert their voices, needs, and agency into the public sphere. Therefore, *value-based organizing* can be a way for abolitionists to show their community members- especially those who are often marginalized- that their opinions *should be valued.*

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It is my duty to educate folks, especially formerly incarcerated folks and marginalized folks, to educate them that their voices do count, because if it didn't count then… So many things wouldn't be being done to keep us quiet. So yes, it's part of my duty to educate my people. When elected officials make decisions, for example, if there's a budget coming up, and we know we need more funding to go into our public education system that's on the corner, because it looks like crap or we're saying that we need a garden, because we want to start learning how to grow flowers, or maybe invest in our parks. The person who's representing our community needs to come and talk to the community, and then they [can] move forward with their decisions.

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Participants grounded their vision in values of care, but also repeatedly highlighted their dedication to *their people*: many saw the significance of the unique needs of every single community member. Therefore, participants rejected the idea that simply research and theory, without any lived experience, can provide solutions for social problems. They connected the

[85] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2019), 345.

concept of *community* to familiarity with the problem as well as the people they are fighting for; community connections were often portrayed through a personal responsibility to the people they saw themselves as serving, one which helped them see their work as urgent. This sense of urgency did not translate into helplessness. Instead of purely advancing their goals, they sought to uplift their people by highlighting *their voices*.

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Movement work is urgency… My insight, my life experience, me sitting in the seat that I sit in this world and watching how it goes round and how formerly incarcerated folks are not included, how marginalized folks are invisible or kept in oppression… We can be in the area, we could tell them our experiences of what's going on for them to understand how laws and amendments and policies should go. We as activists, we as experts in the field are literally trying to inform the process and saying- 'wait let's take a step back, these are the processes that should be implemented, this is the way the oversight should happen.'. We need people that look like me in those positions and people that think like me, people who want to see difference in the future, people who are ready to stand up for what's right and stand up for our people. I think that you only know how urgent it is, if you have lived that life and walked in those shoes and experienced things that have been experienced to know that there needs to be changes and what type of changes that needs to be made and what type of laws that need to be changed, and what type of policies that needs to be for there to be a better system for our people.[86]

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Participants were asked for their opinions about serving in an advisory capacity to elected officials, with examples including sitting on a task force on public safety. Their views on such

[86] Narrative: Agency. See Appendix E.

issues were not uniform. Many of them highlighted the significance of the efficiency of their advisory capacity, wanting to ensure that their input would make a tangible impact. Participants emphasized the danger in their input being dismissed and their role being maintained for public perception. Activists wanted to ensure they had power over the outcomes of their advisory capacity, showing their mistrust of the state. However, the same mistrust also motivated many activists to participate in such advisory capacities: they did not trust their elected officials to properly oversee their communities, and wanted directly impacted individuals to have a say in decision making processes. They saw state agents as often detached from the real-life implications of their decisions, reinforcing their argument for state engagement as a method of representation.

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We have elected officials that are in a certain class of people and don't understand the needs of everyday people as we come, so we feel like if they have someone to represent our community, then they can know what's important to us, how they can help our community instead of just helping a certain class of people because they don't understand where we come from. Having rubrics like that to be like, how is this going to concretely help the community that I care about, and for me it's the Black community, and that helps make those determinations and makes them less abstract and more pragmatic and concrete in terms of who's going to be the best to make sure that this does what we wanted to do. A lot of laws have been written that they are not for people so yeah, we have to have someone who is advocating for the stance we take in the community.

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State engagement was seen not only as a way for activists to properly represent the needs of their people, but to also resist the hierarchy of the state. Participants saw current state institutions as "not for the people," portraying current state institutions as prioritizing the powerful. Participants implied that the state's conceptualization of democracy values certain people over others, and resisted such priorities. In her novel, Hartman also describes Chandler Owen's essay "the Cabaret as a Useful Social Institution," where he "identified the cabaret as the only democratic institution in the United States". He classifies the prohibition of interracial sociality, which occurred in the Cabaret, as a *race riot of virtue.*[87] Such a description presents the Cabaret as a place that only the most radical people dared to go to: a place for people with a dream in which democracy is conceptualized differently and segregation is forbidden. Those people imagined a different reality than the one imposed by the state, in which segregation and Jim Crow laws are incompatible with democratic values. Participants also desired to shift the current dynamics of power; they resisted the notion that the values the state claims as democratic are actually so. While engaging with the state, they demonstrated how the use of personal insights and expertise is a way for abolitionists to reshape democratic norms; by advocating for those who are traditionally left out, abolitionists can push for a democracy in which the concerns of the people are at its core.

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One infrastructure that we [have is] call[ed] reimagining communities. So that was created directly to push back on the vision of reimagining prisons. [We talked to] women [that were] in prison that came home, they were living in the community- mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, grandmas, and we asked them what did they need to stop going to prison- or what do they

[87] Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, *307-308.*

need in general- and none of them said that they either needed to be in prison, wanted to be in prison or wanted a new prison. If you've never stepped foot in a person's shoes and you don't know what it was like for them to be hungry, if you don't know what it feels like to be hungry, how can you even advocate for somebody that's hungry? You can to a certain extent, [but] you have to have someone there, [that] has been in that cage, or been in that predicament, been in that situation and lived it to explain it to know the other side.[88]

Securing Rights

In the essay *Abolition Constitutionalism,* Scholar Dorothy Roberts argues that "prison abolitionists' rethinking of constitutional meaning can further the struggle to create a more humane, free, and democratic world".[89] When framing her argument, she claims that there is a need to both interrogate the relationship of the Constitution to the prison abolition movement and interpret the Constitution through abolitionist theory. Roberts' analysis is largely inspired by antislavery activists; she sees the ways in which they have used the Constitution to promote their goals as not only practical but as a reinterpretation of one the foundational documents of the United States. Her first argument focuses on the rewriting of the original constitution to abolish slavery. She finds it significant that many antislavery activists, such as Fredrick Douglass, created an alternative reading to the Constitution- which she calls an *Abolition Constitution*- in order to advance their goals. In addition, she argues that the Constitution can be used as a practical means to achieve the short-term goals of prison abolitionists that involve engaging with the state. Lastly, Roberts claims that the utilization of the Constitution should not mean a compromise of one's values; by emphasizing the positive elements of abolition that involve

[88] Narrative: Agency. See Appendix E.
[89] Roberts, "Abolition Constitutionalism," 122.

creating new institutions, she demonstrates how an *Abolition Constitutionalism* counters the state's depiction of democracy, not conforms to it.[90]

Yet, Roberts grapples with the ways in which Constitutional laws have been critical to justifying and upholding structures of oppression. She takes seriously the question of whether the Reconstruction Amendments, and the abolition constitutionalism that inspired them, can be trusted as a tool to advance the goals of the prison abolition movement.[91] She poses the following questions to her readers:

> Can we apply prison abolitionist theories to the Constitution's text not only to condemn it but also to use it instrumentally to achieve abolitionist objectives? Can we advocate for a reading of the Constitution that both aligns with the abolition constitutionalism advanced by antislavery activists and attends to contemporary forms of white supremacy and racial capitalism? In the process, might today's abolitionists imagine a new abolition constitutionalism that helps to chart the path toward a society without prisons?[92]

Participants grappled with similar questions as Roberts: what is the best way to utilize a state centered framework without being confined by its boundaries? They acknowledged that there is no clear solution to how one should engage with the state, and that while realistically, such engagement provides many benefits, it also might make one feel constrained in their activism. These insights demonstrated that while state engagement could be a motive for activism, it can be a deterrent as well. State engagement can strengthen the commitment of an organizer by demonstrating the harm of the Prison Industrial Complex. However, without a tangible connection between organizers and the communities they are advocating for, activists

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[90] Roberts, "Abolition Constitutionalism," 109.

[91] There are several reasons why prison abolitionists are reluctant to rely on the Reconstruction Amendment to promote their vision. Many see its language as accommodating slavery; abolitionists often condemn the Thirteenth Amendment's Punishment Clause for allowing the reenslavement of Black people through incarceration. In addition, some abolitionist theorists see the Constitution as central to the U.S legal system, and therefore instrumental to upholding the current carceral regime and preserving a racial capitalist order. (Roberts, 106- 108).

[92] Roberts, "Abolition Constitutionalism," 105.

risk feeling as if they are purely legitimizing state institutions. In such cases, organizers are not able to properly ground their organizing in their values, as community connections help one see state engagement as an act of care. Therefore, they will struggle to engage in *value based organizing*, as they might feel as if state engagement is confining, rather than energizing them.

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I think you have to engage with the state. Even if I'm living out, like in some anarchist commune in the middle of fuck nowhere and I don't pay taxes, I don't... whatever, I'm still interacting with the State because of just the mere fact that the State thinks that they own this land right… So even me ignoring that, is an active interaction with the State, that is like resistance, or whatever, which means you have to resist against something... until we abolish the State there's always a certain level of interaction... [So..] I think that you can, you know, maybe work within certain institutions to implement helpful policies such as like you know, working with libraries to help implement programs that are going to help people stay out of prison, you know, like reentry services and things. But I still think that you, you kind of get stuck working in unhelpful confines and those situations so it's a limited ability to work with that and I think oftentimes people end up feeling like they kind of participate more in the system then they wanted to.[93]

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Roberts' analysis presents ways to reimagine state engagement, one in which recognition is provided through the people, not official institutions. Going back to the Reconstruction Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1866, she argues that "by resisting white domination

[93] Narrative: Government. See Appendix D.

and acting like citizens, black people have secured greater freedom apart from official recognition of their rights, thereby changing the Constitution's meaning to encompass their freedom."[94] Therefore, while such legislation was important, by asserting themselves into American political life and performing citizenship, Black Americans resisted the notion that they are undeserving of rights. Often, such performance was through state engagement: many of the formerly enslaved voted, interacted with the courts to secure property, and ran for office. [95] However, when doing so, they used their autonomy *to secure their own rights*, not relying solely on the state to do so for them. In their interviews, participants expressed a similar desire. While they actively engaged with the state, they did not wait for anyone to provide them with support. For them, state engagement was a way to claim the rights their communities deserve.

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So that's what we're working on, you know, changing the laws to make life better for formerly incarcerated people, closing jails and offering resources. We call it communities over cages. We really believe that if we begin to really implement these tools that we will put in place, that [we] can really increase public safety and start leading with the people and not leading with police. So I think for me it needs to be rooted in community at the end of the day, [because] what we want is a society where we dialogue about how to best treat each other.[96]

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For my interviewees, the right to vote often demonstrated their complicated relationship with the state. They did not hold a uniform view regarding voting, and many had mixed feelings regarding the simple act of casting a ballot. While they expressed a lack of faith in the electoral

[94] Roberts,"Abolition Constitutionalism," 64.
[95] Roberts,"Abolition Constitutionalism," 64.
[96] Narrative: Agency. See Appendix E.

process, they also saw the significance of voting, especially for those who cannot easily access the ballot.[97] Voting has long held a unique position in its relationship to many revolutionary movements for civil rights. Many groups that are disproportionately affected by the criminal legal system, most notably African Americans, have fought a long and contentious struggle to gain such rights; this battle represents more than a singular demand, but who the state sees as worthy- as a person, an American and as a citizen. Richard Juang defines recognition within a liberal democracy as being valued, having one's dignity protected, and possessing some access to self-expression. For him, the struggle for recognition is a cornerstone of US political, social, and cultural activity.[98] Participants were willing to interact with representatives of correctional facilities in order to help incarcerated people vote, seeing such relationships as a way for them to insert the voices of incarcerated people into the political sphere. Such activity demonstrated an active engagement with entities organizers saw as harmful to their people; yet, by doing so on their own terms, participants showed how *value-based organizing* is a tangible way for one to engage with the most harmful elements of the state while centering their autonomy, not state power.

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When I was a part of organizing incarcerated folks to vote, we wanted the prisons registering people, and sometimes, we could get all these people registered to vote, but they wouldn't let us come back into the prison to actually collect the votes. That was what we were facing back then, and lawsuit after lawsuit after lawsuit and, finally, we made you know the little

[97] In 2020, the Sentencing Project estimated that 5,177,780 people were denied the right to vote due to felony disenfranchisement. These numbers support the abolitionist argument that there is a continuity between chattel slavery and the prison system.

[98] Richard M. Juang, "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006,) 706.

progress we did…and that goes for our jail-based voting rights bill that we're pushing for… so what that looks like is, we need to put voting booths in that jail when it's time for elections, because they have a voice as well. And so what that looks like for us, is that now we have to build a connection with the jail, so that way they can allow us to put voting booths in the jail, to allow the people that are incarcerated in that jail to vote. You know a lot of other sheriffs that are leading their jail they don't want to see voting booths inside of the jail because they don't look at people that are incarcerated as if they are human or as if they have a right, and you know that's a problem, but as far as like... I mean as an abolitionist I don't even want to have a conversation with the police or a sheriff. [99]

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While participants often expressed a clear disapproval of the electoral system, they still saw suffrage for the incarcerated as an incremental step towards abolition. While voting has long served as an important symbol of recognition, it also represents larger material consequences. Juang argues that "recognition's importance can be measured by the consequences of its absence: an unvalued person readily becomes a target or a scapegoat for the hatred of others."[100] Juang argues that when a group is not recognized, the state dismisses the severity of any acts of hate towards them, allowing them to go unnoticed. The simple act of *misrecognition* sends the message that a group deserves to be hated and that such harm is inevitable.[101] Participants saw an inherent dehumanization in the carceral system and connected it to incarcerated people's lack of political representation; by doing so, they saw voting as not only representative of one's rights, but their humanity, as well. In many ways, they saw voting as more than just part of the electoral

[99] Narrative: Government. See Appendix D.
[100] Juang, "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition," 706.
[101] Juang, "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition," 714.

process. Their battle for the right to vote was not focused on state recognition, but on the message they were sending to the public. By fighting for the right to vote for incarcerated people, organizers were saying that their opinions, experiences, and material needs matter and should not be dismissed.

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If you're part of the system we have really very little words to talk about, except for me telling you how you could do better, and how you can have another job that allows you to feed your family but doesn't, you know, further incarcerate other people, or you don't have to be a part of that system, but when it comes to the voting bill, you know we have to, on behalf of our people that are incarcerated that have a voice, we have to work with the Jail, so that we can get those voting booths inside that Jail. So we do feel that it's very important so there's a lot of things that we don't display when we actually go inside of the prisons, but it's definitely necessary to have a relationship, you know with them. So that was primarily the work and that work was stressful. It was hard. [102]

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While there are situations in which participants felt as if they were forced to associate themselves with state institutions, there were also times in which they stated that they would do so willingly. While most organizers were not interested in running for office,[103] they recognized the power of elected officials. Therefore, many participants saw the benefit of advocating for the election of people that share similar ideologies to theirs or working with elected officials to some degree. Yet, activists recognized how such power is still a barrier: when one is acting from inside

[102] Narrative: Government. See Appendix D.

[103] The reasons why organizers largely did not want to run for office varied: some did not want to ally themselves with a violent agent, while others simply did not feel like they would be effective as elected officials.

the state, it is much harder to insert one's agency and challenge the status quo, regardless of intentions. Therefore, participants recognized that they should not rely on their relationships with elected officials, even while there is a crucial, practical necessity that comes with engaging in electoral politics.

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Oftentimes, when people are in these positions of power, regardless of skin color regardless of whatever philosophies or ideologies that they may have, it's easier to uphold the status quo, right, and disrupting it becomes a huge challenge. [But if we could] get people, [for example], on the Governor's Council, who have a broader vision of how those appointments could really change the landscape of who is in a decision making capacity within the criminal legal system, [or] if we had abolitionists city councilors in office, I think that we could make a lot of change, and I think that all of our organizing efforts would have a much larger effect… [or] I would run for Governor, because there's a lot of women that are incarcerated right now that are like elderly, some of them on oxygen tanks, some of them have just been incarcerated for like decades and, if I was a Governor I would sign-- at a stroke of a pen you can grant clemency.

I do think everything will be much easier with abolitionists city councilors in office, rather than who we have now. [I think] it's the system that's broken, and even if we get all our best people in there it's still really going to fall short, and… At the same time, I primarily work on issue campaigns, so if we are trying to get some of these things through, in our current system, we can't make these things happen without people and elected positions that are on our team.[104]

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[104] Narrative: Government. See Appendix D.

Hartman's concept of *The Chorus* and The *Abolition Constitution* created by Black citizens in the reconstruction era provide frameworks for prison abolitionists to rethink the core elements of a democracy, including rights, recognition, and political representation. When practicing *value-based organizing*, abolitionists can act on the right to vote, advise elected officials, or even run for office, all with the goal of reconceptualizing the core priorities of civic engagement. Even when engaging with the state, the choices that organizers make can demonstrate a shift in structures of power; prison abolitionists can powerfully show that the relationship between the state and the people is *not* one of dependency, demonstrating agency. Therefore, any decision to engage with the state should be made *with and for the people,* diminishing state power. Such decisions will show not only that the people do not rely on the state, but that they are actively seeking alternatives, even while engaging with it; that they are skeptical of the values that the state upholds, even while they are confined to its structures; that they value *the community* more than formal establishments, and therefore, will use whatever avenue possible to advocate for it.

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I came to learn more about participatory, non-hierarchical, and autonomous forms of organization that appealed to me, both for their offering of something potentially more effective than voting or non-profit work, and for the joy in community that they seemed to invite. [Abolition is] a lot about relying on the wisdom of the community and so practically the way I make decisions [about state engagement] is I listen to these leaders that I've already sort of discerned are in line with my values, pass the vibe check, we have a relationship, I trust them. When we know that what we're trying to do is create a better community for our city or create a better living for the people we love, whatever our personal reason for being part of the

movement is, we should be more centered around that rather than super particular about ideology or the way we go about things.[105]

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[105] Narrative: Relationships. See Appendix H.

Chapter Three:

Reclaiming the Narrative: Abolitionist Knowing and Unknowing

The concept of 'Prefigurative Politics,' refers to the need to ground the goals of a movement with its means and create their desired society. As explained by Liat Ben Moshe in *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition*, "the journey is as important as the destination— non-carceral society will not be achieved through punitive and segregationist mind-sets or praxis." Therefore, in order to create a different social landscape, abolitionists must make sure that the ways of getting there are done using the same principles of the desired goals.[106] In my interviews, participants understood that at times, they must actively participate in state-led institutions that they did not see as aligning with their values. They highlighted the need to promote harm reduction measures and community survival, demonstrating how one's quality of life under state violence was about more than one individual, but a matter of principle. Therefore, participants realized that in order to create a world that is grounded in a non-carceral vision, they had to enact those same mindsets within their organizations.

Institutions associated with the state, such as the law, have historically been a source of legitimacy in conceptions of power, justice, and related discourse.[107] Today, prison abolitionists largely disapprove of hegemonic conceptualizations of justice, accountability, and crime, and advocate for their destabilization, usually within the framework of criminology[108], which often looks towards the law as a source of authority. Yet, participants were often persistent in their

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[106] Liat Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," in *Decarcerating Disability : Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 129.
[107] Sally Humphreys, "Law as Discourse," *History and Anthropology* 1, no. 2 (1985): 252.
[108] Michelle Brown and Judah Schept, "New abolition, criminology and a critical carceral studies," *Punishment and Society* 19, no. 4 (October 2017): 444.

desire to engage with state institutions, despite their role in upholding carceral frameworks. Such ideas bring one to ask: how do abolitionists engage in institutional politics while practicing the values of a radically different society? This chapter centers abolitionist frameworks, narratives, and methods of communication. It aims to understand how abolitionists balance their desire to engage with the state and therefore, work within its structures, and to practice new methods of civic engagement. Specifically, this chapter explores how abolitionists communicate their ideas, both while engaging with the state and while communicating with the public, showcasing the ways in which abolitionists practice *value-based organizing* while doing so.

First, I will introduce a conceptualization of abolition as a form of knowledge, focusing on Liat Ben Moshe's argument of abolition as what she defines as a form *of dis-epistemology:* letting go of attachment to certain ways of knowing, and giving way to others. This argument depicts abolition as not merely a method to let go of dominant understandings of crime, but of a way to reject dominant conceptualizations of knowledge itself, including what kind of knowledge is needed to promote social change.[109] Using Amna Akbar's examination of The Movement for Black Lives' comprehensive policy proposal, I argue that when engaging with the state, a framework of abolition as a form *dis-epistemology* is foremost grounded in shared values, and therefore demonstrates a practice of *value based organizing.*

I make such argument through several claims: first, I demonstrate that a specific policy proposal can still be a form of *dis-epistemology* by pushing back on traditional notions of prescription, certainty, and specific demands, and providing different, nonconforming ones. I continue and argue that by doing so, organizers not only reconceptualize how one should acquire knowledge, but engage in organizing that prioritizes values of care over a specific strategy or

[109] Liat Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," in *Decarcerating Disability : Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 126.

outcome. Therefore, it shows how the centering of communities, a larger vision, and creativity, are ways to practice *value-based organizing,* allowing for minimal reinforcement of state legitimacy.

Then, I argue that even though abolition requires one to unlearn dominant forms of knowledge acquisition, participants demonstrate how such argument applies predominantly to state engagement. I complicate Liat Ben Moshe's argument by claiming that when engaging with the public, *value-based organizing* necessitates an attachment to specific ways of understanding the world, especially as one relates to their values. Such organizing was demonstrated when participants prioritized their values over one's political affiliation in a way that was rooted in certainty and prescription. I argue that this connection to certain ways of learning allows organizers to ground themselves in their values, even when adapting their messaging based on their audience. Therefore, not only can prison abolitionists be attached to certain ways of acquiring knowledge, but it allows them to construct their identity around their values. Yet, *value based organizing* demonstrates how abolitionists can destabilize existing power structures by prioritizing frameworks that center human relationships.

Then, I use Fred Moten's depiction of rent parties to demonstrate how a hegemonic framework can be used to portray new ideas which aim to flourish outside a dominant narrative. I argue that prison abolitionists can use the authority of the state to serve their own narratives, using the framework of the state to serve *the people* by engaging with it through an ethic of care. By doing so, they show how *value based organizing,* a practice of activism rooted in abolitionist values, allows for one to push back on state power, reframing existing structures from within.

Abolition as a form of Knowledge

In *Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing,* Liat Ben Moshe presents abolition as an epistemology, a form of knowledge that is counter hegemonic to the status quo. While the dominant narrative promotes segregating people in the name of justice, rehabilitation, or safety, abolition counters such discourse with a vision "of a world in which carceral and segregated locales are viewed as senseless and commonsenseless." Ben Moshe explains abolition as a framework in which we can transform how we understand our lives, histories, and social relations.[110] In addition, she argues that abolition is a form of *dis-epistemology*, where one must let go of the idea that there is a definitive way to get rid of carceral logics; for her, that same "attachment to the idea of knowing and needing to know (clairvoyance) that is part of knowledge and affective economies [is what] maintain[s] carceral logics." Ben Moshe sees abolition as a framework which rejects the attachment to a certain way of understanding the world, one in which a definitive blueprint is necessary for an effective vision of the future.

For Ben Moshe, a conceptualization of the world which constantly requires clairvoyance maintains carceral logics by preventing one from engaging with abolition gradually and advancing what is called 'an alternative in the making.' She connects such ideas to *the Unfinished* [111], a theory presented in Thomas Mathisen's *Politics of Abolition,* arguing that both require one to reject certainty and instead, allow for change to arrive through process. Ben Moshe claims that abolition is a form of *dis-epistemology* in three ways: it requires us to let go of

[110] Liat Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," in *Decarcerating Disability : Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 116.
[111] Mathisen's *Unfinished* is one of the earliest conceptualizations of prison abolition, rejecting a specific blueprint to promote his vision and instead, centering his argument on *the process* that will bring social transformation. Such a process is one of experimentation, imaginative and gradual.

an attachment to forms of knowledge that rely on certainty, prescription or professional expertise, and portray a specific demand for the future. Therefore, abolition is not only about letting go of dominant narratives regarding harm and crime; it is about letting go of the notion that social change will come with a definitive and certain path.[112]

However, a practical perspective and an abolitionist ethic often prevent one from completely rejecting certainty, forcing one to embrace traditional methods of reform. State engagement, at least in a formal way, often requires one to present a formal policy proposal or alternative. Ben- Moshe highlights how abolition is an ethic that is rooted in the experiences of those most affected by state violence for whom "abolition for the future is already rooted in survival of the now." Therefore, abolition is grounded in a sense of urgency.[113] This tension means that abolitionists must balance an ideology that is founded on gradual change and an urgent need to provide tangible material benefits- often through state engagement.

Policy and Vision

In their interviews, participants consistently discussed the need for harm reduction matters, supporting Ben Moshe's argument for abolition as a matter of urgency. Such sentiments often led them to either support or actively promote policy proposals that will alleviate the suffering of those impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex. In *Toward a Radical Imagination of Law,* Amna Akbar examines the policy platform of The Movement for Black Lives, titled "A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice (the Vision)," contrasting it with reports authored by the US Department of Justice. While the DOJ advocates for more resource allocation to policing, the Vision sees policing as we know it as impossible to

[112] Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," 126.
[113] Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," 112-113.

fix.[114] In the end, any policy proposal relies on a certain understanding of its consequences (certainty); someone to rely on for expertise (prescription); and specific demands for futurity. The Vision does not escape these conditions; however, it also highlights a desire to repair a specific harm. As a result, the decision to engage with the state acknowledges that the entity which caused this harm has the power to solve it. Just like among the participants I interviewed, a policy framework was contextualized within the needs of individual community members.

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Sometimes, people in nonprofits talk about how we're standing at the edge of the river watching babies floating by, and so we have to grab the babies out of the river to keep them from drowning. But at a certain point, we have to go upstream and see who's throwing the babies in the river, right? That's one way of dramatizing the tension between putting out fires by just directly responding to emergency situations where people are being harmed and then looking at and fighting against the sources of those harms. Our power with regard to these institutions, in certain ways, can be, or at least feel like: Are we going to participate in this institutional process, or are we going to do nothing?[115]

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Even though participants chose to engage with the state, there were times in which they expressed helplessness. They portrayed their engagement as a practical obligation, one which was forced on them, as it is the only way to alleviate the suffering within their communities. In such situations, state engagement was an urgent matter: it was contextualized within a quick decision-making process, one akin to an emergency response. The Vision is a comprehensive,

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[114] Amna A. Akbar, "Toward a Radical Imagination of the Law," *New York University Law Review* 93, no. 405 (2018): 410.
[115] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.

transformative policy proposal, actively engaging with the state through institutional politics; however, its prioritization of harm mitigation rejects a reliance on prescription or professional expertise, demonstrating how a policy proposal can be a method of unlearning dominant ways of acquiring and presenting knowledge.

Such methods of unlearning demonstrate an organizing practice that is committed to an ethic of care: the Vision grounds itself in addressing the 'immediate suffering' of Black people, including policies that are explicitly stated to be 'less transformational,' yet needed to address the material conditions of Black communities. Akbar argues that by doing so, it prioritizes the lived experiences of people over changes in the law itself.[116] Therefore, organizers prioritize the needs of directly impacted people, driven by the values of care which ground abolitionists organizing. Language which normalizes the experiences of impacted communities as experts- not academics or data- not only rejects hegemonic understandings of expertise but is also rooted in an abolitionist practice of *value based organizing*. Such language implies that while the state is needed for harm mitigating reforms, it does not hold power over social movements and their priorities. The Vision is using its platform to both reject prescription and practice abolitionist values: by doing so, it uses a policy proposal to demonstrate how engaging differently with knowledge and learning are an inseparable part of *value-based organizing.*

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Even though the women that I have worked with are abolitionists, they cannot ignore what I call conditions of confinement. I see all of the tensions, and I see also all of the potential gains. I think when some people are very against working with the state at all they're not willing to accept any potential gains because they think it's not worth it at all, but for me any material

[116] Akbar, "Toward a Radical Imagination of the Law," 426.

change for any person's well-being in this country, where people are suffering deeply, as well as in other countries as well [is worth it]. Especially because we know abolition is such a long-term goal, in the meantime we shouldn't be letting people who are prisoners suffer any more than we can help. So if a reform helps them not suffer and have a certain quality of life, whatever we can give them, I think those are worth pursuing.[117]

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Participants often used a cost- benefit analysis when considering state engagement for harm reduction purposes. Some acknowledged a complete opposition to the state as a possibility, but not one that they seriously considered, as the benefits of state engagement were too large. Organizers' considerations demonstrate how much worth an abolitionist ethic places on the individual person. Participants saw a tremendous amount of value to any reform that will alleviate one's suffering, regardless of how much they would have to engage with the state in order to promote such measures. Even while calling such measures "small gains," such reforms allowed participants to surrender their helplessness while engaging with the state. When purely reacting to state violence, participants were flexible in the reforms they pursued, focusing on the fastest way to promote the best quality of life for their communities. In many ways, participants were *forced* to reject the more traditional ways of activism referenced by Ben Moshe. Because they are grounded in the needs of those most impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex, abolitionists can not afford to ground themself in prescription, certainty, or professional expertise; therefore, an abolitionist practice of *value-based organizing*, which prioritizes values of community care, requires one to maintain some kind of flexibility.

[117] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.

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I do sometimes see that it's okay to work alongside the state or to do some kind of civic engagement if and only if it actually means something like material change. There is so, so, so much widespread misery, pain, and harm created by these institutions that literally millions of people are dealing with every day. Listening to these people and helping them get what they're telling you they need is a way of doing something. It's really important to fight for the small gains that make a difference between whether people live or die or how endurable their lives are- and it's easy to be dismissive of those gains.[118]

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The reasons that participants had to pursue harm reductive reforms allowed them to question the authority of the state, even while engaging with it. The underlying reason behind the Movement for Black Lives' engagement with the state was not to satisfy policy-makers or to pass an 'achievable reform,' but for the necessary, urgent needs of the people they serve. While organizers need to provide for their people, they don't necessarily see formal institutions as equipped or willing to do so. The Vision portrays current state institutions as violent entities, and does not conceptualize its relationship with the state as one of trust; however, despite distrusting the state, organizers are engaging with it for the well-being of their people. Such a relationship demonstrates a willingness to reject certainty and definiteness, where organizers are willing to engage with harmful institutions- with all the dangers that entails- for the wellbeing of their people. Such an ambivalent relationship opposes a perspective in which there is a singular approach for a non-carceral future. Therefore, the rejection of certainty is motivated by values of care and community, showcasing the connection between a framework of abolition as a method

[118] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.

of *dis-epistemology* and the practice of *value-based organizing.*

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While we don't necessarily negotiate with the state, we do quick response campaigns to make sure that individual prisons are stocked with fresh water and supplies. And so things like... We had this campaign last year to push the DOC (Department of Corrections) to release folks who are incarcerated that were at a health risk because of COVID because of pre-existing conditions so that we could de-densify the prisons and send as many people home as possible. That, for me, was such a hard decision to support because, on the one hand, what you're doing is reinforcing that some people deserve to go home and some people don't. And on the other hand, the lives of everyone incarcerated depended on being able to de-densify those spaces and taking as much action as possible, to prevent the spread of COVID. Those are times, where our individual efforts and communicating with prisoners that we have a one-on-one relationship with, those are helpful, but at the end of the day, we need large-scale immediate response from the state, that only the state can give in that instance. Sort of like digging a hole in the building and literally taking everyone out.[119]

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While participants were aware of the ways in which they reinforced the power of the state or carceral logics, they did not have a definitive answer regarding how to confront such dilemmas. Ben Moshe writes that "the goal of abolition is therefore not finality but process itself, trial and error, and understanding disorientation as generative." She argues that abolition is an ongoing struggle, and therefore, when we stop moving, the movement towards abolition dies.[120] Such an acknowledgement is demonstrated in the various ways in which participants saw the

[119] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.
[120] Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," 127.

tension that comes with state engagement as an uncertain process, one which will be resolved differently every time. Yet, they continued to engage with the state, demonstrating continued rejection of conceptualizations of the world which necessitate complete clairvoyance.

A rejection of clairvoyance was demonstrated through The Vision, as well. Those who authored The Vision were engaging with the state through an unpredictable process; the proposal shows how they saw state structures as actively working against them, as demonstrated in powerful language such as 'the War on Black people.'[121] Yet, organizers were willing to reject certainty and absolutism; instead of completely rejecting an entity which they saw as violent, they approached the unknown in order to address the suffering of their communities. By doing so, they demonstrated a practical way in which they prioritized their abolitionists values while engaging with the state.

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I'm not... opposed to air conditioning- if it's something like that that's going to save people's lives or… even like Pell Grants, I think that those are good, as long as people aren't losing sight of the larger issues. I'm not opposed to helpful quality of life reforms. Regardless [of if someone says that] 'oh that's not a good use of my time to give this housesless person a sandwich because that's not addressing the causes of poverty and houseleness', it's like- the person needs a sandwich. I think ideologically we just have to weigh our true values, what we really want, but be realistic, that's where dialectical materialism and Communism tells you to be realistic of where you are right now in this moment. Yes, live through your ideals, but be accepting of what you can tangibly do to change your moment.[122]

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[121] Akbar, "Toward a Radical Imagination of the Law," 429- 430.
[122] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.

While participants saw the significance to harm reduction matters and actively promoted them, they did not lose sight of their larger vision. For them, the two were often inseparable. The Vision does have specific proposals, and focuses on demands that aim to shift power away from the state and towards Black communities. Examples of such demands are reparations, invest-divest, and community control over police.[123] Yet, it reimagines traditional modes of demands for the future by providing them through an imaginative framework. The Vision provides the Movement for Black Lives' overarching goal, which is "a complete transformation of the current systems, which place profit over people and make it impossible for many of us to breathe."[124] This larger goal is malleable, allowing itself for flexibility in the future it pursues, while grounding itself only an aspiration for the future, one in which the needs of the most marginalized are met. Therefore, even though the Vision provides a specific proposal, its framework is first and foremost rooted in an abolitionist ethic of care, showing how the rejection of traditional modes of policy demands are also a practice of *value-based organizing*.

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I would love it if this government didn't exist- I don't put any legitimacy in this horrible government- and I do feel like it's what we have to work with. And I don't see us abolishing the state anytime soon. If that does happen, great. [But] I can't ignore that my city officials affect the police department budget. The city officials are not going to cut the police budget if we don't talk to them. The police are going to do their thing, they're not going to decide their budget, so it's okay if we don't talk to them. The kinds of things we can win in the short term, could really affect people's lives in direct ways. If we were successful in getting a non-police crisis response going, that is actually peer run and lead… That could really decrease the police contact that people

[123] Akbar, "Toward a Radical Imagination of the Law," 426- 427.
[124] Akbar, "Toward a Radical Imagination of the Law," 426.

have and could really prevent a lot of trauma and a lot of getting embroiled with the system that otherwise would happen.[125]

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Any proposal within a state-oriented structure must be future oriented, at least to a certain degree. However, the proposal's name is "the Vision," using a broader narrative to push for long-term, structural change. By doing so, it uses language to demonstrate that even while advocating for specific policy demands, it can still reject futurity and *too much specificity*. This deprioritizes a specific outcome as a primary goal, advocating for a broader reimagination of a potential future. Therefore, while the Vision conveys its goals through its policy proposal, it is grounded in values of care, and is not confined to its explicit goals. Such a framework demonstrates how the Vision uses a framework of *dis-epistomology* to practice *value-based organizing*; by rejecting a specific blueprint for the future, it showcases organizing that is grounded in a care ethic.

For The Movement, the Vision is not a piece of legislation, but a conceptualization of their future, one that was done with wisdom and creativity. It is more than procedure, but a but an act of innovation and planning that was created *for and by* the people. Akbar writes that "the movement is not attempting to operate outside of law, but rather to reimagine its possibilities within a broader attempt to reimagine the state."[126] The Vision does so by signaling to the public that it rejects traditional conceptualizations of what policy should convey. Therefore, a rejection of specificity allows them to reframe a future-oriented process as one that is grounded in values.

[125] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.
[126] Akbar, "Toward a Radical Imagination of the Law," 409.

Public Messaging

The Vision demonstrates how state engagement can be a method of rejecting hegemonic forms of conceptualizing knowledge, how it is learned and portrayed. However, *value-based organizing* should be conceptualized differently when engaging with the public. When engaging with the state, abolitionists unlearn and reject dominant forms of organizing, forms which usually do not center those who they see as *the people.* When doing so, abolitionists must reject prescription, certainty, and specificity- at least to some degree. Yet when communicating with the public, attachment to prescription, certainty, and specificity helps abolitionists ground themselves in their values of care, allowing them to practice *value-based organizing.*

In their interviews, many participants discussed their desire to 'meet people where they are at.' While most participants were firm in their belief that they will not abandon their values, they also adjusted the language they used to accommodate their audience, using the aspects of an abolitionist framework that will resonate with them more. They did not approach their activism in a divisive manner; they saw the potential of finding a common ground with anyone. Their approach was a practical one: they understood the utility in a flexible framework, one which people can adopt in whatever way suits them. Yet, it was also rooted in participants' personal approach to activism: while organizers cared about policy, they grounded their work in their values, practicing *value-based organizing* even while not directly engaging with the state. Therefore, the way in which they connected to their audience was through shared values: even if they disagreed on some policy issues. By doing so, the core foundations of their organizing- the language that they used- prioritized human connection over political affiliation, reframing the priorities to civic engagement.

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It's all about framing and finding some sort of common value, I mean, even if we don't say things the same way, most people have a pretty limited list of core values... I think if we pick our language right, we can help people see that our values are not inherently combative. A huge part of community organizing is being really clear about your own stake in the issue, but then also knowing the stories of other people and understanding the stories of other people and being clear about their stake too, why do they care about this or not care about this, why are they afraid of this. I think that speaking from where you are at somebody who has been indoctrinated in a different way might make you feel very good about yourself and might make you feel morally superior and you can just bask in the glow of your self-righteousness- but you're not going to bring anybody along that way, you're just not going to. So I will talk to people in terms that they're interested in talking [about], instead of just in the terms that matter to me. You can talk to a right winger about abolition and sometimes they'll actually agree with you, you know. Same as you can talk to a liberal about it, you [can] talk to a radical about it, you just really have to talk about it differently… So meeting people where they're at is basically where I'm coming from.[127]

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While participants discussed their individual experiences with language and messaging, their approach represented a more structural perspective. Participants acknowledged the normalization of carceral logic in society, and the difficulties that one might encounter in unlearning it. Such difficulties can be seen through the impacts of the process of *interpellation* and its legitimation of the criminal legal system. Such ideas represented how participants saw potential in every human being, even those who they did not agree with. Therefore, they had

[127] Narrative: Messaging. See Appendix F.

faith in the ability for anyone to undergo an inner transformation and adopt similar values to theirs. By actively promoting the idea that any person can embrace abolitionist values, activists rejected punitive norms that do not allow for individual change. Such clear dedication to their personal values demonstrated that organizers were not completely disconnected from certainty and prescription. Yet, such attachment to certain conceptualizations of the world was expressed when discussing their messaging to other people, not within the framework of state engagement. Therefore, they saw their values as grounded in *the people,* not the state, allowing them to push back on existing political priorities even while communicating with the public.

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Part of abolition... especially reading about transformative justice, is that no one's disposable and we don't leave anyone behind. So part of how that has to work is that we meet people where they're at. I might change what I emphasize, or how I approach people, based on what I know of their lived experiences and what I think about abolition that will connect with them. For example, when I'm talking with a group of people in a church and I know [that] half of them are cop wives or something, well you're sure as hell going to hear about the fact that I'm married to a disabled veteran who was in the military, and I know what it's like to be a military spouse. Because there's something about the way that those worlds kind of interact and intersect that builds a certain level of trust. But never… I don't wash down my politics. I just make the conversation start differently. I don't believe in watering down or changing my message, just to have someone else agree with me, because then they're not really agreeing with me, they're agreeing with the watered-down message.[128]

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[128] Narrative: Messaging. See Appendix F.

While participants attempted to bridge the divide between them and those they disagreed with, some elements of abolitionist values were almost core to their identity. They never specified what they were, but were firm in their decision to never take out those elements from their messaging. When saying so, participants were almost defensive: they were protective of what they saw as the most core elements of an abolitionist message, almost as if it was a part of their identity. Ben Moshe writes that "The question becomes not "what is the best alternative" in its final formulation, but how this new order shall begin from the old."[129] Therefore, abolition de-centers a final product in its organizing model, acknowledging the impossibility of finding a definitive blueprint which reflects the nuances of human relationships. However, many of my participants saw themselves in search for not only certainty, but core values that will ground their work. While they still rejected a framework of absolutism while engaging with the state, they allowed themselves to embrace more certainty when interacting with other people. This embracement of certainty is necessary for an abolitionists practice of *value-based organizing*, as it grounds organizers in their values of *people* and *community.* Because they acknowledged that they often change their messaging when communicating with different people, their core values can be seen as a way to maintain their agency.

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Sometimes I feel like as abolitionists maybe our messaging is not clear, or that out of fear people assume we mean all or nothing… I think the purpose of the reforms has to be at the forefront of our argument in order for them not to just make the state look better. We live in the real world, this isn't abstract, this isn't just ideological, and so obviously there are moments where there's compromise, or we have a win but it's not quite all the way, or whatever. I think

[129] Ben- Moshe, "Abolition as Knowledge and Ways of Unknowing," 127.

the thing we don't compromise on is messaging. Making sure the message is clear-- that this is the temporary measure to cause less harm and death until abolition is achieved, this is not the win, this is not the end goal, the end goal is not to make being held prisoner an appropriate reaction to anything or an appropriate punishment.[130]

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Participants often had to utilize flexible strategies and were concerned that such flexibility undermined their vision by making it less clear. Therefore, they sought for their public messaging to reflect their values, seeking to highlight the ways in which an abolitionist framework is grounded in the urgency and practical necessities of the current political climate. For them, such an approach would always be an incremental measure towards their long-term, more ambitious, goal. They acknowledged that such an approach would require compromises, yet they always wished to convey their underlying values- the basis to their approach to *value based organizing*- to the people they talk to. By doing so, they demonstrated how no matter what strategy they chose, they grounded themselves in their ethic of care. Such form of organizing allowed them to actively build a movement whose contingency was devoted to ordinary people, not those who are in positions of political or economic power.

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At the same time, I think popularizing or making more acceptable the language of abolition is also important because it shouldn't be this hush hush or extreme viewpoint. One of the biggest threats to abolition is the way that the State in particular, has been propped up by a lot of media and other places [that] sort of recycle these honestly very factually incorrect narratives, and so there has to be a really clear, strong narrative. The carceral narrative is

[130] Narrative: Messaging. See Appendix F.

deeply ingrained in our society through education and media and culture overall… We were indoctrinated on late night TV with cop shows and… you know, 'terrible crimes' that occurred… and the public mindset is in a different place. So that's one way that I'm fighting for change- through the legislature begins the process of asking the public to think about this, [and] we're educating a lot of people. And it's really not hard to challenge the propaganda that comes from that side, it's just that this narrative is the only one that most people are given. Which, [that] the only choice we're given for dealing with harm is to call the police or do nothing, you know.[131]

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While the process of *interpellation* demonstrates the state's power over hegemonic narratives in society, these narratives can be used to weaken state power through a process of redefinition. In one of earliest conceptualizations of prison abolition, Thomas Mathiesen claims that "the more we use the language of the powerful, the more attuned we become to defining the problems at hand as the powerful usually do."[132] By doing so, he argues that a critical understanding of those in power can be used by those who wish to challenge them, using the hegemonic narrative itself to eventually overturn it. Participants sought ways to integrate abolitionists narratives into the mainstream, and often used state engagement to do so. A prominent example of such situations was when organizers saw state engagement as a larger opportunity to educate the public, promoting their larger vision. Such situations demonstrated how an abolitionists approach to *value-based organizing* consistently centers ordinary people in their activism, even those who were not yet abolitionists.

[131] Narrative: Messaging. See Appendix F.
[132] Mathiesan, *The Politics of Abolition*, 19.

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I do think it's important for a political movement like abolition to get as many people [as [possible] on your side, no matter what their political orientation is, because we're not going to get there just with the radical leftists, we're not going to get there if it's just us. Like… imagine talking to a room full of libertarians, or even like the Republican Convention and saying the phrase 'no one deserves to tell me what to do, or to make decisions for me' you're going to get a lot of agreement, most likely in those crowds. Now, when you more specifically say, 'and therefore we shouldn't hold people prisoner and control what they eat, drink, where they sleep, who they talk to when they can go to the bathroom.' They may initially disagree, but if you can start off on that agreement, I think you've got a better chance of being heard because they've already latched on to something that's like 'Okay, we have something in common, you're not here to fight me'. Versus if I go to the same crowds and say, 'I believe we should burn all the prisons down,' probably nothing I say after that's really going to be heard. I've already started off on the wrong foot. You know, if you're in your own little world and you speak from your perspective, you alienate people. And what I want is to bring them along.[133]

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While participants believed in anyone's ability to adopt an abolitionist ideology, they also had a practical understanding of the current political climate and sought to navigate it. Some participants were particularly creative when considering political stakeholders that may disagree with them, and language that might be used in order to bridge the divides between their ideologies. Such consideration demonstrated how participants differentiated their larger, ideological framework, and practical state engagement. They saw the benefits of collaborating

[133] Narrative: Messaging. See Appendix F.

with non-abolitionists and the ways in which they could strategically engage with them. Their practicality demonstrated that while they saw harm reduction measures as urgent, participants maintained their autonomy by strategically choosing who could help their cause, or how they might wish to communicate with them. They sought to help non-abolitionists understand their ideology and use such understanding to advance necessary reforms. By doing so, they did not see such forms of communication as harmful, but as a way to build their movement.

Social Frameworks

Organizers maintained their agency by practically choosing with who and how to communicate, yet often, such choices led them to engage and communicate with state agents. The linguistic tools in Fred Moten's *Air Shaft, Rent Party* perfectly demonstrates how through *value-based organizing,* concepts associated with hegemonic social frameworks, such as state institutions, can be reclaimed and used as a method of empowerment. In his essay, Moten describes a rent party: originated in Harlem during the 1920's, musicians would play during such parties to raise money in order to pay rent, and the events were often an occasion for Black tenants to gather and socialize. Moten compares the rent party to a political party: it is new because it is not political, but an end to all political parties. Throughout the text, his description of a rent party is defined through the task of negation; he states that "it could be called the house party but don't let that mislead you into thinking that house implies ownership."[134] While the party opposes an existing organization- the political party- it does so by using the language belonging to what it negates. In order to be oppositional to traditional politics, it must define itself as a *political party.* In order to negate capitalism, it must speak of ownership, even if to

[134] Fred Moten, "Air Shaft, Rent, Party," in *Stolen Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), 188.

defy it. Yet, such negation is also a powerful demonstration of agency. By using an existing political framework to create something new, Moten shows that adopting the language of the state does not have to mean conforming to its narrative; people will always have the ability to use such concepts and reclaim it for their own purposes. Within the prison abolition movement, this process of reclamation comprises centering state engagement around values of care.

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I do believe that in order to get there [the long-term goal of abolition], survival of our community or our communities is also a really high priority, and so there are people who are in prisons, right now, where their well-being their mental health, their families' well-being, depends on them getting out, getting back into their community, and getting access to resources to actually heal. So there's again, that dialectical tension, like, I want to destroy capitalism, but today I need to give this person a sandwich or five bucks. Or I want to destroy prisons, but today I'm going to write a letter to this person who's incarcerated because that's the best contribution I can make today.[135]

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Many abolitionist goals- especially those that involve tangible policy change- indicate a desire for state incorporation, even if by necessity. This desire for inclusion is representative of the urgent need for tangible material change, one that can often be provided through short-term, harm mitigation measures. The rent parties described by Moten were also a space of fugitivity; a space for those who dare, a refuge, yet "refuge still indicates that those who take it are refugees and people tend not to want to have to live like that."[136] Rent parties attempt something new, yet they coexist with a potential admission into the status quo- along with its benefits. However,

[135] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.
[136] Moten, "Air Shaft, Rent, Party," 189.

participants' emphasis on individual and community autonomy demonstrates how state incorporation in the form of material benefits does not take away from their ability to shift existing power structures. Participants perceived their organizing in a more holistic perspective and saw a tremendous amount of value to individual well-being and healing. Such an emphasis demonstrates how their ethic of care was prioritized when engaging with the state, using a grounding framework of values. Therefore, when advocating for resources to their community members, organizers centered their values, no matter which tactics they used; by going so, they saw themselves as shifting the dynamics of power.

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One of the things we're trying to do is get as many people out of immigration jail as possible. And in order to do that, you actually have to interact with the state, and you're giving [it] money. And so, in a in a way you're playing into it, and you know, you're supporting it, and at the same time that's going to get someone home, that's going to get that person home to their family, it's going to give them more of a chance to make their case to stay in the US. I've [also] helped raise money to pay bond for an activist that was targeted on some bullshit trumped up charges. That's interaction with the state, and I would even say [that] if my whole thing is like 'don't give them money,' like that's actively giving $5,000 of money to them, right? Is that going to change the system? no. but it's going to help with that community survival. And we can pay someone's bond and simultaneously also be working to shift where the power in that system lies, so that the people can reclaim their agency. In an ideologically pure world, I'd be like 'that is a bad idea', but I also think it's a bad idea to just let Mark rot away in prison, we're not leaving

him there, especially if part of the reason that he is being targeted is because he's being so courageous and he's speaking out. We're not just gonna be like 'sorry...'[137]

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Abolitionist methods of *value-based organizing*, which promote community survival and healing, are not purely reactive, but demonstrate a new approach to politics. A need for certainty, prescription, expertise, and specific demands maintains society's reliance on carceral logic; no matter how awful the status quo is, it is easier to hold on to it when the future is unknown, broad, and open to interpretation. However, language that prioritizes the experiences and needs of *the people* demonstrates how a rejection of certainty, prescription, and specific demands can be a practice of *value-based organizing.* Such organizing shows how when engaging with the state, a framework of abolition as a form of *dis-epistemology* allows for one to practice their values. Yet, it is crucial to remember that an abolitionist practice of *value-based organizing* is first and foremost grounded in values of care and peoplehood. Therefore, when communicating with community members, certainty, prescription, and specificity allows one to ground themselves in their values of community care by centering human connections over choices of policy or strategy.

While the state still holds power over hegemonic forms of knowledge, organizers can use its language to reframe those same narratives, replacing them with one's that challenge the status quo. When demanding change from the state, the language we use demonstrates the narrative we wish to portray: even while making specific demands, abolitionists can push back on the notion that a specific demand is the ultimate answer, and call for a reimagination of the relationship between social movements and the state. Such a reimagination is grounded in caring for *the*

[137] Narrative: Harm Mitigation. See Appendix G.

people, and therefore is rooted in an abolitionist practice of *value-based organizing.* Therefore, even though participation in institutional politics could strengthen the states' legitimacy as a provider of resources, organizers are able to make decisions regarding state engagement while centering those they care about the most. All such examples demonstrate how in the end, language can be used in any way we want to, even if seemingly contradictory.

Conclusion

In this project, I seek to understand the relationship between a radical social movement and institutional politics. I engage with questions such as: how do organizers transform a system while working within it? How can one use a structure they see as harmful to promote a radical vision, while avoiding reinforcing its legitimacy as much as possible? More specifically, I explore this tension within the prison abolition movement: it holds an ambitious vision of social transformation yet is often forced to engage with the state to promote its short-term goals. I argue for a practical understanding of abolition, one that is informed by the nuance of organizing work. In this thesis, I combine qualitative interviews of abolitionist organizers and an analysis of abolitionist literature to develop a theory of state engagement with minimal reinforcement. I use the term *value-based organizing* to describe the ways in which prison abolitionists reconceptualize state engagement to an idea that is grounded on their values of community and peoplehood. I argue that by doing so, organizers are able to engage with the state while maintaining their autonomy, shifting power structures.

In chapter one, I explore the abolitionist conceptualization of *value-based organizing,* and its relationship with how abolitionists see the state. I center this chapter in Boggs' et al notion of a *revolution of values* as a future oriented, empowering framework, arguing that it allows abolitionists to ground their organizing in the people despite the prevalence of *carceral logic* in society. I argue that direct experience with the carceral state is needed to understand abolition as an urgent matter, and therefore it shapes an abolitionist conceptualization of *value-based organizing.* I continue to engage with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's essay *the University and the Undercommons* to demonstrate how the power of the state makes it impossible to refuse it; yet, the impossibility of refusal allows one to understand how *value*

based organizing complements Boggs' et al *revolution of values* and the agency that it provides; I argue that while a *revolution of values* provides abolitionists with agency over the foundational values of society, *value based organizing* provides a framework for abolitionists to maintain such autonomy while engaging with the state. Finally, I demonstrate how my participants grounded their organizing in their values, a necessary act in order for one to practice *value-based organizing.*

In chapter two, I examine the compatibility between state engagement and prison abolitionists organizing through a broader lens, examining the state's monopoly over what we call 'democracy,' and the potential of prison abolitionists to reconceptualize it. First, I examine Saidiya Hartman's concept of 'the Chorus' to demonstrate the multiple ways in which community belonging allows for a reconceptualization of state engagement as methods of community care, agency, and resistance. Then, I use Dorothy Roberts' concept of a *New Abolitionism Constitutionalism,* building on her understanding of state engagement as a method for marginalized communities to autonomously secure their own rights. I argue that through *value-based organizing,* state engagement can be a way for abolitionists to push back against who the state deems worthy. I use the examples of voting, advising elected officials and running for office to demonstrate the *value-based organizing* is a tangible way in which prison abolitionists can reconceptualize state engagement, reframing the democratic process as one which is grounded in values.

In chapter three, I discuss the theme of abolitionist messaging and narratives. I center the conceptualization of abolition as a form *of dis-epistemology:* letting go of attachment to certain ways of knowing and giving way to others. I engage with Amna Akbar's analysis of the Movement for Black Lives' policy proposal, titled "The Vision." I argue that by centering

communities, a larger vision, and creativity, the Vision demonstrates how a framework of abolition as a form *dis-epistemology* is foremost grounded in shared values, and therefore practices *value-based organizing.* I then argue that when engaging with the public, *value-based organizing* necessitates an attachment to specific ways of understanding the world, especially as one relates to their values. I argue that participants demonstrated such practices when they prioritized their values over other people's political background in a way that was rooted in certainty and prescription. In such an approach, not only are prison abolitionists attached to certain ways of understanding the world, but grounded their organizing around it. Yet, such an approach still pushes back on state power by prioritizing human connections over policy outcomes. Finally, I use Fred Moten's portrayal of rent parties to argue that abolitionists can use frameworks that are controlled by the state to their benefit; through *value-based organizing*, they can use state authority to promote the wellbeing of their people, maintaining agency.

Implications

As mentioned previously, this project engages with a form of grounded theory, where the researcher builds a theory while studying the emerging data. My decision to use this methodology was intentional; while this project engages with a variety of academic scholarship, I always desired to form my core argument through the lived experiences of organizers. Therefore, I see this project as challenging future theoretical analyses- in any field- by asserting that any kind of theory must have an active and meaningful connection to those impacted by the topic they explore. Whenever academics research a topic, they must do their best to understand the perspectives of those who are living and breathing the topics they examine. I argue that one's lived experience and personal understanding of an issue should be seen as a more credible source

of knowledge than many others, and should always be considered in research. Research has material implications, and therefore, there can be significant implications if a project is detached from the people who are impacted by it.

An additional implication to this project relates to the scope and meaning of abolition. In their interviews, participants often blurred the line between the state and the criminal legal system, demonstrating how their negative experiences with the criminal justice system shaped their opinions towards the state. Some participants saw abolition as narrowly focused on prisons and police, and expressed more willingness to engage in civic participation, while others expressed hostility towards any institution associated with the state. These responses pose a larger question: What is abolition? Is abolition purely about abolishing the Prison Industrial Complex, or is it about more than that? Participants' responses reflect the diversity within the prison abolition movement, as well as its imaginative nature. *Value based organizing* is a way for abolitionists to engage with the state regardless of if they seek to solely abolish the Prison Industrial Complex or the state as a whole; it unifies organizers around their core values of community care. However, more research could be done to understand the diversity of ways in which abolitionists practice *value-based organizing* based on their personal conceptualization of abolition, and the following implications on their state engagement.

This thesis applies a theory of *value-based organizing* to the prison abolition movement, examining its relationship to the state. However, other radical movements experience similar tensions, including Democratic Socialism[138] and the movement for reparations for slavery.[139]

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[138]Ali Aslam, David W. McIvor and Joel Schlosser, "A Democratic Turn within Democratic Socialism? State-Centric and Anti-Statist Visions of Socialism and the Challenge of Democratic Mirroring," *New Political Science (2021):* DOI: 10.1080/07393148.2021.1997265

[139] Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson. "THE POSITION OF THE UNTHOUGHT." *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 197–198. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20686156, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study,* (Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 150- 155.

Therefore, such movements, and others, might benefit from examining how this theory might apply to their models of organizing and ability to engage with the state in a way that benefits them. A grounding framework of values can be beneficial to any organizer whose ideology consists of a vision that is beyond the scope of traditional state institutions, yet they still engage with them.

In addition, this project engages with the meaning of civic life. Do we have to give the state power over what we perceive to be 'the democratic process?' The state has a monopoly over most, if not all, of our institutional processes. Yet, I argue that state engagement is not a static concept as one might claim; the practice of *value based organizing* shows that no matter how much power the state holds, activists always have a certain amount of agency over what they see as communal life and civic engagement. In reality, more research should be done to understand what that reconceptualization looks like. What do prison abolitionists do within their organizations- and in the wider public sphere- to reimagine the concept of civic engagement?

Such reconceptualization would have policy implications as well. The abolitionist practice of *value of based organizing* means that radical activists, most of which advocate for structures completely different from current state institutions, choose to engage with the state. Moreover, such a model provides more agency to the people while doing so, empowering them to continue and engage with institutional politics while pushing back on state power; yet, how does that influence the institutional processes and state institutions they engage with? The ways in which abolitionists choose to run for office, advise elected officials, or vote, could influence state-led processes, including, but not limited to, policy making, electoral politics, and more. Further research should be done to understand these implications.

Appendix A: Creating Composite Narratives

I would like to highlight that when I began my research, I did not know what my final result would look like. I knew I wanted my project to be centered around the experiences of the organizers that I interviewed, but I did not know how I would present my findings. Therefore, much of the process I present now is the journey in which I learned the optimal way to use my interview data. This appendix is a transparent documentation of a process of learning: not a demonstration of full expertise.

First, after conducting my interviews in August 2021, I coded the interview transcripts in the software NVivo, using the following codes: 'Community care,' for times participants talk about abolitionist values of care, community and related themes, 'Examples / stories,' for specific examples or stories provided by participants to demonstrate their ideas, 'Legitimacy'- themes related to the legitimacy of the state, 'Resources,' for quotes related to allocation of state funding or resources, 'State power,' for quotes related to harms done by the state, the power of the state and harm mitigation that abolitionists pursue as a result. Additional codes were 'Social Transformation,' for quotes related to a certain vision or a world that abolitionists want to see, 'Reasons / factors,' for quotes related to factors that influenced why participants choose to engage or not engage with the state, and 'Messaging,' for quotes related to messaging, with the sub-code 'stick to abolitionist messaging' or 'change messaging'.

These themes were purposefully very broad, as I only had an understanding of larger recurring themes that appeared in the interviews, but not how they would be used in the context of an argument driven project. In addition, some themes, and therefore codes, overlapped. I began my process by creating a separate google document for the quotes- one document for each code. I then manually went through every one of the documents and highlighted the quotes in

three different colors: yellow, blue and green. Yellow quotes were for quotes which I associated with the theme of state violence, abolitionist values, and harm mitigation. Blue was for quotes that demonstrated that abolitionists reinforced the legitimacy of the state or provided it with more resources. Green was for quotes about messaging. I noticed that often, there was an overlap between different themes, especially those highlighted in yellow and those in blue. This was the initial step that allowed me to narrow down the quotes that I was interested in using. I then created documents for all of the highlighted quotes and labeled them "all highlighted in [yellow/blue/green] and transferred all of the highlighted text there. For the purposes of this appendix, I will call these three documents "highlight documents".

Next, I started to create my narratives. I went through my "highlight documents" and noticed more specific themes that were noticeably prevalent throughout the quotes. I created additional documents for these specific themes, which were: "the government", for themes demonstrating the monopoly of the state over any kind of short term reforms or governing institutions, "state violence" for themes demonstrating violence perpetrated by the state, "agency", demonstrating the abolitionist desire for communal agency, "relationships and solidarity," demonstrating the mutual relationships prevalent in the abolition movement, "values of care," for the values prison abolitionists seek to create, "harm mitigation," for themes that portray the significance of harm reduction strategies in the movement, and "messaging" to present the different ways activists used messaging in their organizing. I then went through the three "highlight documents" and divided the quotes that I thought worked within the more specific themes mentioned above. Then, I transferred them to the seven new, more specific documents in order to begin creating my narratives.

These seven documents were the basis for my narratives. For every narrative, I had an initial document and a final document. In my process, I went through the initial document in order to choose which quotes to include in my narrative. I would not be able to use all of the quotes, as such a narrative would be too long, repetitive, and to some degree, not representative of all the organizers I interviewed. Because often themes repeat themselves, I wanted to do my best to demonstrate my findings in the most effective way, while not being too repetitive by using similar quotes. As I created my narratives, I made sure to return to my interview recordings, listening to ensure that the quotes I chose were accurate.

When creating the narratives, I took into consideration several factors: I wanted to include the voices of as many activists as possible, so one participant would not be overly represented. I also wanted to ensure that the order of the quotes would reflect such diversity. One of the main goals of the narratives is to use storytelling to convey the ideas that I noticed throughout all of the interviews, so I chose quotes that demonstrated my finding in the clearest way possible. I attempted to combine quotes that discussed common themes with each other, putting them in the same paragraphs. In addition, when combining the quotes, I did my best to balance quotes that discussed values and ideas with quotes that discussed specific examples. I did not include quotes that were too specific and were clearly oriented only towards one organizers' specific experiences, as I felt as if I could not apply that to my general argument, and were not reflective of all participants. However, I did include examples that I felt as if they were applicable to the general themes, ideas, or values that activists were discussing. I felt as if examples were helpful to demonstrate my ideas, ground them in reality, humanize my participants, and add to the idea of storytelling.

Lastly, I edited the narratives for clarity and grammar. I note in my narratives if and when I added substantial content, which I only did for the purposes of clarity. When editing, I often deleted words such as ‘like’, ‘you know’, and other additions that contributed to wordiness. I did not change language or grammar that is associated with AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and did my best to keep the narratives representative of the activists’ way of portraying their experiences. While my narratives present stories in a uniform, first person narrative, Appendix B, C, D, E, F, G and H document which quote was said by which organizer.

Appendix B: State Violence

This narrative is composed of the stories of 7 activists: Andrew, Em, Linda, Robin, Robyn, Sashi, and Scout. It presents the finding that the state holds a tremendous amount of power over its subjects and through the Prison Industrial Complex, harms predominantly Black, brown, and low-income communities. This narrative aims to demonstrate the effects of the criminal legal system on those directly impacted by policing and incarceration.

I'm an abolitionist, the way I got introduced to being an activist in the community is because my dad was incarcerated when I was a child, and my mom was incarcerated when I was a young adult. So just understanding the obstacles and the trauma that prisons and jails, not only have to the people that are currently incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, but also the children and the families that also have to take on that burden (Sashi). I mean, that's a big part of where poverty comes from- communities being disrupted by breadwinners being plucked out of the community and then being traumatized when they go back- and often just being literally unable to find legal work because they have a record, you know. The way this thing is set up, you know, could not be further from the pretense of rehabilitation (Andrew). So what we're telling people is that it's not just about removing an entity that is highly harmful to the community, but rather taking away the resources that they have because clearly those resources haven't proven effective (Linda).

And then also just being a young woman in the community, and understanding the different obstacles that we have to overcome and endure everyday living in a community that is over policed and just like deeply incarcerated. I mean, even just as a young woman, as a mom, just taking a left turn sometimes without using a blinker, you're subject to being pulled over, and

possibly, just [being] mistreated, belittled, dehumanized just because you took a left turn and so you know all those things cause more harm (Sashi). Police who are literally doing nothing for the community are getting paid half a million dollars, just to patrol our streets and terrorize our community right and so what we're saying is, if you can give us a fraction of that money, what we can then do as an alternative is ensure that these young people that might be committing crimes of poverty, have an avenue, right, have universal income, have access to education, so that they don't have to resort to the things that they're resorting to now just to survive on the streets, right? (Linda)

Also I feel like… police are supposed to be here to protect and serve, and through my experiences, the only community that police are protecting and serving is white communities or communities that have more financial stability. And then, the only place that they police is the black and brown communities or the cash poor communities and so that's a problem to me- now that I'm a mother, I work really hard to kind of create community-lead alternatives that don't include systems that cause more harm because it's really important for my daughter's future. (Sashi) [And] they (the police) have no consequences right, but yet their mistakes cause a lifetime of trauma, and so I think that, for me, that's where I talk about it- it's not just about this idea that 'oh the police are bad because I myself am a criminal and I come from a history of criminality', but rather I don't have faith and trust in this entity, an organization that is rooted in its history of slave catchers right and the slave patrol (Linda).

You know, I have just seen how much harm is done in the prison system over and over again, for years, with the way it affects families and just how cruel it is and how the people who they consider worth killing are people who were horribly abused and just normal people without resources, you know (Em). When people are in prison, I don't think they are any worse or better

or more or less likely to do harm than all the rest of us. It's more about who gets targeted for incarceration. However, it feels like people think [that] when someone's put in prison, now they can't hurt anyone. Well, no, now they can just hurt a very specific population of people that they're all trapped with (Robin). It's easy to be disappeared as a prisoner, it's certainly easy to get the shit beaten out of you and be thrown in solitary for a decade, or whatever you know, for whatever reasons that they can justify or fabricate so there's no recourse basically (Andrew). There's times where we've seen officers treat women that's inside in very degrading ways. Cursing at them… and your human side is screaming, but if you say something that could be- all it will take is that officer to go say something to administration and then your organization is no longer to come inside (Robyn).

In 2018, I supported solidarity efforts with the National Prison Strike and befriended incarcerated abolitionists who had been punished for participating in the strike [like] my friend who was put in solitary for 18 months for one email he sent suggesting the value of work stoppages (Scout). It is so hard to see.. that position where [incarcerated people are] talked to in a certain way, and [they] can't say anything in fear [of] lockdown, taken to the hole or whatever term people use for getting put in a totally different jail cell inside a prison. But yeah, a lot of times [you have to do] a lot of biting your tongue and turning your head away and then, once it's over going to speak to the person try to lift them back up (Robyn). It just it kind of feels like nonsense to me because [incarceration] doesn't limit the harm, it's just like enclosing a bunch of people in a tight space together and then dehumanizing them, and then punishing them when they don't necessarily act upon their best instincts and who would after being tortured? (Robin)

The idea of prison was supposed to be rehabilitation, and that's not it at all, it’s a system of degradation and humiliation, and so I remember those times, and that's what gives me the

strength to keep going like ‘this is needed, I know you're tight, and it’s 12 o'clock at night, and you got up at six o'clock in the morning, but it’s needed, and one day we're going to be where we want to be, and this will all be worth it.’ (Robyn)

Appendix C: Values of Care

This narrative is composed of the stories of 8 activists: Ace, Andrew, David, Denise, Kion, Linda, Maddy, and Scout. It presents the finding that the prison abolition movement is rooted in values of community care. Participants showed an aspiration to build a world in which every human being is equally valued, and expressed such desires through their devotion to their community. Participants often connected their personal values to their willingness to engage with the state, as they agreed to do so in order to support community members in need.

When I'm talking about you know just the abolitionist movement I'm talking about it in the context of the love and care that I have for community… The work that I'm doing is because I genuinely love and care for my community, for POC people, for Black and brown solidarity (Linda). The only people I'm going to cater to in that way is the people- like, the people that I'm accountable to- incarcerated people, poor people, disabled people (Kion). That's what drives my work. So when I identify a harmful source, most of the time, which is the police department and white supremacy, my work is not led by hatred towards them, because at the end of the day I don't hate these people, I don't know these people (Linda). I can always go back to that- I'm with Black people, with incarcerated people, with poor people, and I'm with working people (David). [So while] a lot of people think about this work [as] very black and white, very us versus them, I think that it's a little bit more complicated than that. It's not just 'Fuck the police' it's not that, right? It's yes, 'Fuck the police' and 'my community needs access to adequate housing' (Linda). So the answer to the question, I think- if it benefits the community, or to protect the community, those are the times that I will interact with the state (Kion).

What we are proposing, what we want to happen instead, what we are building while we destroy, is not some new thing for the government to do, but rather our communal processes of resource-sharing, skillsharing, joy-making, direct communication, mutual support, and keeping each other safe. (Scout) If two people are available to each other, you know, for mutual aid, and if those people are mindful of each other's needs and if they're building community and if they're building community with everyone that they can reach-- there's a solidity and a stability to that, as trivial, as it is (Andrew). I am nothing without the people who care for me, the earth that sustains me. I literally would not be alive (Scout).

There's that need to constantly like… imagine what we're building toward for the future, so that we are actually practicing those new ways of being with one another, so that we're not… Just kind of perpetuating the behaviors, the culture, whatever the status quo (Ace). So we have to foreground care everywhere… Care is the best, or a very tangible, way to combat capitalist and carceral logic. How does that show up? So doing organizing in the traditional sense… then also community care- how do we care for each other, how do we work in the moment to make prisons and the State obsolete by building up the networks that we need to care for each other, right now (Maddy).

I think one of the functions of prisons is to isolate people and to destroy families and just to destroy community. So to reject that logic and to be like 'no, we're going to make sure that folks are able to remain members of their community, that they're important members of my community, of our communities, and to have those connections and make sure that people have the resources to make those connections,' definitely feels like an abolitionist goal (Maddy). A lot of things go on inside of the jails and the prisons and they really don't care about that people- somebody has to care (Denise). Regardless of what that person did or what's really going on, the

real reason for them being there, because as an abolitionist I don't believe in punishment as an appropriate channel to pursue when a harm has happened, or a mistake has happened, or a law is broken, whatever it is…. We can have true liberation by growing and understanding the value of every single human life (Ace).

Appendix D: Government

This narrative is composed of the stories of 11 activists: Ava, Denise, Elle, Em, Kion, Linda, Maddy, Mia, Rob, Robyn, and Sashi. It presents the finding that when advocating for short-term reforms, prison abolitionists acknowledged the necessity of engaging with the state. Such necessity exists because of the States' monopoly over formal institutions which impact the lives of the communities they work with and care about.

I think you have to engage with the state (Robyn). Even if I'm living out, like in some anarchist commune in the middle of fuck nowhere and I like don't pay taxes, I don't like.. whatever, I'm still interacting with the State because of just the mere fact that the State thinks that they own this land right… So even me ignoring that, is an active interaction with the State, that is like resistance, or whatever, which means you have to resist against something... until we abolish the State there's always a certain level of interaction (Elle).

When I was a part of organizing incarcerated folks to vote, (Kion) we wanted the prisons registering people, and sometimes, we could get all these people, you know, registered to vote, but they wouldn't let us come back into the prison to actually collect the votes. You know that was what we were facing back then, and lawsuit after lawsuit after lawsuit and, finally, we made you know the little progress we did… (Kion) and that goes for our jail based voting rights bill that we're pushing for… so what that looks like is, we need to put voting booths in that jail when it's time for elections, because they have a voice as well. And so what that looks like for us, is that now we have to build a connection with the Jail, so that way they can allow us to put voting booths in the Jail, to allow the people that are incarcerated in that Jail to vote (Sashi). You know a lot of other sheriff's that are leading their Jail they don't want to see voting booths inside of the

Jail because they don't look at people that are incarcerated as if they are human or as if they have a right, and you know that's a problem, but as far as like... I mean as an abolitionist I don't even want to have a conversation with the police or a sheriff (Sashi).

If you're part of the system we have really very little words to talk about, except for me telling you how you could do better, and how you can have another job that allows you to feed your family but doesn't, you know, further incarcerate other people, or you don't have to be a part of that system, but when it comes to the voting bill, you know we have to, on behalf of our people that are incarcerated that have a voice, we have to work with the Jail, so that we can get those voting booths inside that Jail (Sashi). So we do feel that it's very important so there's a lot of things that we don't display when we actually go inside of the prisons, but it's definitely necessary to have a relationship, you know with them (Robyn). So that was primarily the work and that work was stressful. It was hard (Kion).

Power is really concentrated in lawmakers right, I mean-- the ways that they pass legislation (Linda). Sure, it's reinforcing the legitimacy of the State, but also, I guess, to me, I don't see it as a realistic short-term goal anytime soon that we're going to like delegitimize the city government, I just don't think it's going anywhere, so it seems sort of pointless to me to bank on or like ignore them as a tool to try to influence in the short term (Mia). With legislation, if orgs are going to support or endorse legislation, or lobby for or against city budgets, it requires some level of involvement with state officials, just because the State currently has a monopoly on legislation and budgeting (Maddy). Being an organizer, it's about building power, and doing work for the community. You need to be in touch with any and everybody that have something to do with providing resources to the community for our people to be stable (Denise).

[And state officials are] the ones that we can get a lot of inside information from (Robyn), so I think we have to engage with them to get really the bigger picture to get what we want. [For example,] this past mother's day we did a Black mama bail out.. So I really was shooting my shot when I thought I was calling a jail to see, if I could get some information or even get them on a phone call, but there was a caseworker who actually had all three of the women on her load and she called me back the same day, and was like 'hey, I think it's so dope you know that y'all are trying to bail these three women out, you know, I want to cry because they really don't belong in here.' And she was like 'so I'm going to try and have them call you, so be by your phone because they're going to call you and then they'll tell you what they need, and if they can have a place to go or whatever they need they'll tell you.' And so I was like 'okay cool' and she sure enough, all three of those women call me. And we were able to bail them out and provide them with their needs. And that might be a once in a lifetime thing, because when I told our family, our movement family, I was like 'yeah they called me back and they let the three women call.' They was like 'what? you are able to call them?!' and I'm like 'yeah I never knew I could do that.' They was like 'you can't do that! I don't even know how you did that!' and I'm just like 'Oh, okay,' but you know, it was a really cool moment that I appreciated that the woman actually helped me, you know, bail out the three Black mamas (Sashi). [So] even with the prison we do keep relationships open and you do have some people say 'hey try this' or, 'this is the best time to ask for this' or 'yeah not today, it says it's not gonna happen' or 'yeah he's never going to approve that' (Robyn). So we put on the smiles and we just say what we need to say to get the information that we need to get to keep us moving in our direction we're trying to go. (Robyn)

Oftentimes, when people are in these positions of power, regardless of skin color, regardless of whatever philosophies or ideologies that they may have, it's easier to uphold the

status quo right and disrupting it becomes a huge challenge (Linda). [But if we could] get people you know, [for example], on the Governor's Council, who have a broader vision of how those appointments could really change the landscape of who is in a decision making capacity within the criminal legal system (Ava), [or] if we had abolitionists city councilors in office, I think that we could make a lot of change, and I think that all of our organizing efforts would have a much larger effect… (Mia) [or] I would run for governor, because you know there's a lot of women that are incarcerated right now that are like elderly, some of them on oxygen tanks, some of them have just been incarcerated for like decades and, if I was a governor I would sign-- at a stroke of a pen you can grant clemency. (Sashi) I do think everything will be much easier with abolitionists city councillors in office, rather than who we have now (Mia).

[I think] it's the system that's broken, and even if we get all our best people in there it's still really going to fall short, and… At the same time, I primarily work on issue campaigns, so if we are trying to get some of these things through, in our current system, we can't make these things happen without people and elected positions that are on our team (Elle).

[And] when you're on parole, you have to work with the state. The agent has to come to your house and check your House, they do have to piss test you…. Even with [our] reentry group, they have to make sure they follow their parole stipulations to stay out. If they don't follow those stipulations they will go back. So in those situations, we see it being okay to work with their parole agents who are, quote unquote 'the state' to keep them out of prison (Rob).

[So..] I think that you can, you know, maybe work within certain institutions to implement helpful policies such as like you know, working with libraries to help implement programs that are going to help people stay out of prison, you know, like reentry services and things. But I still think that you, you kind of get stuck working in unhelpful confines and those

situations so it's a limited ability to work with that and I think oftentimes people end up feeling like they kind of participate more in the system then they wanted to (Em).

Appendix E: Agency

This narrative is composed of the stories of 7 activists: Ava, David, Denise, Kion, Linda, Robyn, and Sashi. It presents the finding in which prison abolitionists ground their activism in a sense of deep dedication to the needs of their community and show a desire for more communal agency. Participants often expressed an interest in having an active role in decision making processes that impact their communities, even if that means actively engaging with state institutions.

One infrastructure that we [have is] call[ed] reimagining communities. So that was created directly to push back on the vision of reimagining prisons. [We talked to] women [that were] in prison that came home, they were living in the community- mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, grandmas, and we asked them what did they need to stop going to prison- or what do they need in general- and none of them said that they either needed to be in prison, wanted to be in prison or wanted a new prison (Sashi). If you've never stepped foot in a person's shoes and you don't know what it was like for them to be hungry, if you don't know what it feels like to be hungry, how can you even advocate for somebody that's hungry? You can to a certain extent, [but] you have to have someone there, [that] has been in that cage, or been in that predicament, been in that situation and lived it to explain it to know the other side (Denise).

I thought it was time to try to make a change and show people that, you know, that things can be different… So I hit the ground running. I came out, you know, fighting for the people I wanted to be the voice for the people that I've seen, people- marginalized folks- post their head, neck, before even going to Jail, out on the street (Denise). They all said the same thing: they needed resources, you know, nice income that was livable, affordable housing, housing period, yes, substance use treatment, mental health [treatment], and all those things you can't get inside

of a prison or jail. And so you know, we have our infrastructure of reimagining communities which literally [it's] like building that village out back into the communities that are most impacted by incarceration (Sashi).

We have elected officials that are in a certain class of people and don't understand the needs of everyday people as we come, so we feel like if they have someone to represent our community, then they can know what's important to us, how they can help our community instead of just helping a certain class of people because they don't understand where we come from (Robyn). Having rubrics like that to be like, how is this going to concretely help the community that I care about, and for me it's the Black community, and that helps make those determinations and makes them less abstract and and more pragmatic and concrete in terms of who's going to be the best to make sure that this does what we wanted to do (David). A lot of laws have been written that they are not for people so yeah, we have to have someone who is advocating for the stance we take in the community (Denise).

So that's what we're working on, you know, changing the laws to make life better for formerly incarcerated people, closing jails and offering resources. We call it communities over cages (Robyn). We really believe that if we begin to really implement these tools that we will put in place, that can really increase public safety and start leading with the people and not leading with police (Sashi). So I think for me it needs to be rooted in community at the end of the day (Linda), [because] what we want is a society where we dialogue about how to best treat each other. (Scout)

It is my duty to educate folks, especially formerly incarcerated folks and marginalized folks, to educate them that their voices do count, because if it didn't count then… So many things wouldn't be being done to keep us quiet. So yes, it's part of my duty to educate my people

(Denise). When elected officials make decisions, for example, if there's a budget coming up, and we know we need more funding to go into our public education system that's on the corner, because it looks like crap or we're saying that we need a garden, because we want to start learning how to grow flowers, or you know, maybe invest in our parks. The person who's representing our community needs to come and talk to the community, and then they [can] move forward with their decisions (Sashi).

We had an elder that was shot and robbed- he owns a business here- and he said that he didn't want the kid to go to prison, he wanted him to get help. And you know, recognizing that the community said, this person who was the victim said that they don't want him to go to jail, [he was sent] to Jail anyway, regardless of what the community want[ed]. Some of the work I do now is restorative justice… It'll be great to get that involved here. In partnership with the District Attorney, so instead of sending people to jail and prison, we will be able to send people to a program that will create a restorative effect for the person who caused the harm and who was the victim of the harm (Kion). Basically, we're trying to get the community and help the community and that's much better than just locking people up (Robyn).

Movement work is urgency… My insight, my life experience, me sitting in the seat that I sit in this world and watching how it goes round and how formerly incarcerated folks are not included, how marginalized folks are invisible or kept in oppression… We can be in the area, we could tell them our experiences of what's going on for them to understand how laws and amendments and policies should go (Denise). We as activists, we as experts in the field are literally trying to inform the process and saying- 'Wait let's take a step back, these are the processes that should be implemented, this is the way the oversight should happen.' (Linda). We need people that look like me in those positions and people that think like me, people who want

to see difference in the future, people who are ready to stand up for what's right and stand up for our people (Sashi). I think that you only know how urgent it is, if you have lived that life and walked in those shoes and experienced things that have been experienced to know that there needs to be changes and what type of changes that needs to be made and what type of laws that need to be changed, and what type of policies that needs to be for there to be a better system for our people (Denise).

I think in community and movement building, you have to go as a coalition, you know, together- and it's already strength in numbers. (Denise). A big thing is the concept of Participatory Defense where you bring in family and friends to help with the defense of somebody who's been caught in the system, and you might not think that the person should even been arrested to begin with, or that the law was unjust or whatever, but at the same time, you're participating in that process… (Ava) Organizing is about telling stories. It's about, I guess, maybe pulling heartstrings to get some understanding about what it is that your stance is in this fight. (Denise) [And] through that really then, finding a solution to the needs that our community is really you know, are asking for (Linda).

Appendix F: Messaging

This narrative is composed of the stories of 8 activists: Ace, Andrew, Ava, Elle, Em, Maddy, Manu, and Robin. It presents the finding that participants saw messaging as a crucial factor when engaging with the state. Participants were adamant about remaining consistent with their core values of abolition and their long-term goals. At the same time, they acknowledged the diverse lived experiences among their audience and emphasized their willingness to change their messaging in order to find common ground.

Part of abolition... especially reading about transformative justice, is that no one's disposable and we don't leave anyone behind. So part of how that has to work is that we meet people where they're at (Elle). I might change what I emphasize, or how I approach people, based on what I know of their lived experiences. And what I think about abolition that will connect with them (Maddy). For example, when I'm talking with a group of people in a church and I know [that] half of them are cop wives or something, well you're sure as hell going to hear about the fact that I'm married to a disabled veteran who was in the military and I know what it's like to be a military spouse. Because there's something about the way that those worlds kind of interact and intersect that builds a certain level of trust (Elle). But never… I don't wash down my politics. I just make the conversation start differently (Maddy). I don't believe in watering down or changing my message, just to have someone else agree with me, because then they're not really agreeing with me, they're agreeing with the watered down message. (Ace)

It's all about framing and finding some sort of common value, I mean, even if we don't say things the same way, most people have a pretty limited list of core values... I think if we pick our language right, we can help people see that our values are not inherently combative (Robin).

A huge part of community organizing is being really clear about your own stake in the issue, but then also knowing the stories of other people and understanding the stories of other people and being clear about their stake too, why do they care about this or not care about this, why are they afraid of this (Elle). I think that if speaking from where you are at somebody who has been indoctrinated in a different way might make you feel very good about yourself and might make you feel morally superior and you can just bask in the glow of your self righteousness but you're not going to bring anybody along that way, you're just not going to (Ava). So I will talk to people in terms that they're interested in talking in, instead of just in the terms that matter to me (Em). You can talk to a right winger about abolition and sometimes they'll actually agree with you, you know. Same as like you can talk to a liberal about it, you talk to a radical about it, you just really have to talk about it differently… So meeting people where they're at is basically where I'm coming from (Manu).

I maintain- I'm an abolitionist, no matter who i'm talking to, I'm never not an abolitionist (Maddy). I absolutely use words like abolition and I'm very consistent with that, but there's sometimes that my narrative approach is going to be different so… I deal with a lot of like white feminists because I'm white and I'm a feminist. So when I hear white women be like 'I can't have a world without police, because what if I get assaulted? What would happen to me?' It's like-- Ah yes, this is why, your reason for not being all in on abolition is because perhaps you survived a terrible, horrific, traumatic experience or if you haven't, you know that it's very possible and you know someone who has, right? So it's like-- Okay, then how can we talk about this, and then we talk about how the architects of [the] abolition movement are often survivors of violent crime. How the current carceral system doesn't actually provide justice for victims and survivors (Elle). I think that you can speak your truth and speak it from a place of being true to your values

and finding commonality and those grounding values with someone who might have a different opinion or perspective than you. I think that it's possible to speak to what those values are in order to achieve what you want, and obviously provide enough information so that the people you're trying to talk to or convince or whatever understand why it is that you're taking that approach (Ace).

At the same time, I think popularizing or making more acceptable the language of abolition is also important because it shouldn't be this hush hush or extreme viewpoint (Robin). One of the biggest threats to abolition is the way that the State, in particular, has been propped up by a lot of media and other places [that] sort of recycle these honestly very factually incorrect narratives, and so there has to be a really clear, strong narrative (Elle). The carceral narrative is deeply ingrained in our society through education and media and culture overall… (Em) We were indoctrinated on late night TV with cop shows and… you know, 'terrible crimes' that occurred… and the public mindset is in a different place. So that's one way that I'm fighting for change- through the legislature begins the process of asking the public to think about this, [and] we're educating a lot of people (Ava). And it's really not hard to challenge the propaganda that comes from that side, it's just that this narrative is the only one that most people are given. Which, like the only choice we're given for dealing with harm is to call the police or do nothing, you know (Em).

I do think it's important for a political movement like abolition to get as many people on your side, no matter what their political orientation is, because we're not going to get there just with the radical leftists, we're not going to get there if it's just us (Manu). Like… Imagine talking to a room full of libertarians, or even like the Republican Convention and saying the phrase 'no one deserves to tell me what to do, or to make decisions for me' you're going to get a

lot of agreement, most likely in those crowds. Now, when you more specifically say, ‘and therefore we shouldn't hold people prisoner and control what they eat, drink, where they sleep, who they talk to when they can go to the bathroom.’ They may initially disagree, but if you can start off on that agreement, I think you've got a better chance of being heard because they've already latched on to something that's like ‘Okay, we have something in common, you're not here to fight me’. Versus like if I go to the same crowds and say ‘I believe we should burn all the prisons down.’ Probably nothing I say after that's really going to be heard. I've already started off on the wrong foot (Robin). You know if you're in your own little world and you speak from your perspective, you alienate people. And what I want is to bring them along (Ava).

It's definitely important with any… you know any writing or speaking, to know the audience and address the audience (Andrew). So, if i'm talking to people who aren't well versed in abolition, which is most people I guess, I try to focus on things that are kind of common ground, I think, like how something supports community safety, you know, and I try to explain. And talking about crime, you know… We're talking about harm. (Em) The consistency is abolition. And at the same time, big on the common ground of like- ‘okay, maybe you can't imagine a world without police yet. I'm really clear that abolition is the way, but do you know that like 97% of the calls that police respond to have nothing to do with violence at all and they're usually like weird property stuff? So maybe we could at least agree that there should be 97% less police and we could just, you know, make the budget at least 97% smaller, right? (Elle)’

Sometimes I feel like as abolitionists maybe our messaging is not clear, or that out of fear people assume we mean all or nothing… I think the purpose of the reforms has to be at the forefront of our argument in order for them not to just make the state look better (Robin). We

live in the real world, this isn't abstract, this isn't just ideological, and so obviously there are moments where there's compromise, or we have a win but it's not quite all the way, or whatever. I think the thing we don't compromise on is messaging (Elle). Making sure the message is clear--that this is the temporary measure to cause less harm and death until abolition is achieved, this is not the win, this is not the end goal the end goal is not to make being held prisoner an appropriate reaction to anything or an appropriate punishment (Robin).

Appendix G: Harm Mitigation

This Narrative is composed of the stories of 12 activists: Ace, Ava, Andrew, David, Denise, Elle, Em, Maddy, Manu, Mia, Robin, and Scout. It presents the finding in which prison abolitionists acknowledge the severity and scope of the damage caused by the Prison Industrial Complex, and therefore engage in constant harm reduction- which often necessitates engagement with institutional politics.

Sometimes, people in nonprofits talk about how we're standing at the edge of the river watching babies floating by, and so we have to grab the babies out of the river to keep them from drowning. But at a certain point, we have to go upstream and see who's throwing the babies in the river, right? That's one way of dramatizing the tension between putting out fires by just directly responding to emergency situations where people are being harmed and then looking at and fighting against the sources of those harms (David). Our power with regard to these institutions, in certain ways, can be, or at least feel like: Are we going to participate in this institutional process, or are we going to do nothing? (Scout)

I do sometimes see that it's okay to work alongside the State or to do some kind of civic engagement if and only if it actually means something like material change (Manu). There is so, so, so much widespread misery, pain, and harm created by these institutions that literally millions of people are dealing with everyday. Listening to these people and helping them get what they're telling you they need is a way of doing something (Scout). It's really important to fight for the small gains that make a difference between whether people live or die or how endurable their lives are- and it's easy to be dismissive of those gains (David).

Even though the women that I have worked with are abolitionists, they cannot ignore what I call conditions of confinement (Ava). I see all of the tensions, and I see also all of the potential gains. I think when some people are very against working with the state at all they're not willing to accept any potential gains because they think it's not worth it at all, but for me any material change for any person's well being in this country, where people are suffering deeply, as well as in other countries as well [is worth it] (Manu). Especially because we know abolition is such a long-term goal, in the meantime we shouldn't be letting people who are prisoners suffer any more than we can help. So if a reform helps them not suffer and have a certain quality of life, whatever we can give them, I think those are worth pursuing (Robin).

We support incarcerated folks with a five fold method of solidarity which begins with pen paling (David), [but] honestly it's really varied and it includes everything from jail support-like supporting people as they're getting out of jail and giving them rides and giving them food and connecting them with services to just, you know, correspondence with prisoners (Andrew). There are always so many unmet needs that people impacted by the criminal legal system are experiencing. The idea that if we aren't doing these specific reforms then we're doing nothing is just ludicrous (Scout). For us, the daily solidarity with folks inside is at least as important as any kind of long-term abolitionist vision and ideally, they're in a dialectical relationship so that one informs the other-- but at the end of the day, our task is to help people day to day, who are incarcerated (David).

While we don't necessarily negotiate with the state, we do quick response campaigns to make sure that individual prisons are stocked with fresh water and supplies (Robin). And so things like... we had this campaign last year to push the DOC (Department of Corrections) to release folks who are incarcerated that were at a health risk because of covid because of pre-

existing conditions so that we could de-densify the prisons and send as many people home as possible. That, for me, was such a hard decision to support because, on the one hand, what you're doing is reinforcing that some people deserve to go home and some people don't. And on the other hand, the lives of everyone incarcerated depended on being able to de-densify those spaces and taking as much action as possible, to prevent the spread of covid (Ace). Those are times, where our individual efforts and communicating with prisoners that we have a one on one relationship with, those are helpful, but at the end of the day, we need large-scale immediate response from the state, that only the state can give in that instance. Sort of like digging a hole in the building and literally taking everyone out (Robin).

You know, you can literally be like 'I don't want to engage with the prison at all because I'm too pure to do that, and therefore I can't be of any use to people who are inside the prison.' And if that is somebody's version of abolitionism, then God bless them- but that's not what I'm doing (David). The state as it exists is not really going anywhere for a while and given it isn't (Mia), the need for engagement here comes from the disproportionate power that state institutions hold over our lives (Scout). [So] any reforms that make a tangible difference in somebody's life like ensuring food quality, access to clean water, to healthcare… I think those are incredibly important (Robin).

One of the things we're trying to do is get as many people out of immigration jail as possible. And in order to do that, you actually have to interact with the state and you're giving money to the state. And so, in a in a way you're playing into it, and you know you're supporting it, and at the same time that's going to get someone home, that's going to get that person home to their family, it's going to give them more of a chance to make their case to stay in the US (Ace). I've [also] helped raise money to pay bond for an activist that was targeted on some bullshit

trumped up charges. That's interaction with the state, and I would even say [that] if my whole thing is like ‘don't give them money’ like that's actively giving $5,000 of money to them right? (Elle) Is that going to change the system? no. but it's going to help with that Community survival. And we can pay someone's bond and simultaneously also be working to shift where the power in that system lies, so that the people can reclaim their agency (Ace). In an ideologically pure world I'd be like ‘that is a bad idea’, but I also think it's a bad idea to just let Mark rot away in prison, we're not leaving him there, especially if part of the reason that he is being targeted is because he's being so courageous and he's speaking out. We're not just gonna be like ‘sorry...’ (Elle)

I would love it if this government didn't exist- I don't put any legitimacy in this horrible government- and I do feel like it's what we have to work with. And I don't see us abolishing the state anytime soon. If that does happen, great (Mia). [But] I can't ignore that my city officials affect the police department budget. The city officials are not going to cut the police budget if we don't talk to them. The police are going to do their thing, they're not going to decide their budget so it's okay if we don't talk to them (Manu). The kinds of things we can win in the short term, could really affect people's lives in direct ways. If we were successful in getting a non-police crisis response going, that is actually peer run and lead… That could really decrease the police contact that people have and could really prevent a lot of trauma and a lot of getting embroiled with the system that otherwise would happen (Mia).

I'm not.. opposed to air conditioning- if it's something like that that's going to save people's lives or… even like Pell grants, I think that those are good, as long as people aren't losing sight of the larger issues. I'm not opposed to helpful quality of life reforms (Em). Regardless [of if someone says that] ‘oh that's not a good use of my time to give this housesless

person a sandwich because that's not addressing the causes of poverty and houseleness', it's like- the person needs a sandwich (David). I think ideologically we just have to weigh our true values, what we really want, but be realistic, that's where dialectical materialism and Communism tells you to be realistic of where you are right now in this moment. Yes, live through your ideals, but be accepting of what you can tangibly do to change your moment (Manu).

Policies that make the lives of incarcerated folks better or freedom, [are] a way that I would engage with institutional politics… I think that there are ways of. doing less material harm to incarcerated folks, freeing incarcerated folks, and improving quality of life that are based on policy changes, [but] I don't think policy is going to free people (Maddy). Pre-arrest diversion, bail reform, ban the box- where on applications, where they asked you if you were a convicted felon- got that box taken off applications. There were about 40 or more ordinances that were changed, the reclassification of marijuana; That was done. So all those things were while trying to get to the final goal of closing the jail (Denise). Ending money bond obviously doesn't end mass incarceration, it doesn't like totally crumble the carceral system in our country, but it makes a huge difference to all the people affected by that and it does hopefully weaken the infrastructure in a way, puts a crack in the infrastructure (Elle). But, again, I also recognize the importance of survival, right, so surviving the system, and so [for example-] when Trump was running for President… absolutely- I didn't not want him to win. Despite what I thought about the democratic candidates. I knew that more violence would happen with Trump in office. I figured that probably it would also happen with a democratic president in office, just maybe not to the same extent, or maybe in different ways, maybe in a more like… kind of undercover kind of way (Ace).

How do we survive the day to day versus, how do we achieve those long-term goals? And sometimes surviving that day to day means throwing someone else under the bus or saying ‘yes it's fine, take your money, just like let me be free’ or whatever it is (Ace). [Still,] I've supported prisoner protests for condition based things as needed, but I generally try to keep the long-term goal being on closing more units, funding things that actually work, and limiting state power (Em).

I do believe that in order to get there [the long-term goal of abolition], survival of our community or our communities is also a really high priority, and so there are people who are in prisons, right now, where their well being their mental health, their families’ well being, depends on them getting out, getting back into their community, and getting access to resources to actually heal (Ace). So there's again, that dialectical tension, like, I want to destroy capitalism, but today I need to give this person a sandwich or five bucks. Or I want to destroy prisons, but today I'm going to write a letter to this person who's incarcerated because that's the best contribution I can make today (David).

Appendix H: Relationships

This narrative is composed of 6 activists: Ace, Andrew, David, Elle, Manu, and Scout. It presents the finding in which the prison abolition movement is presented as one that is rooted in deep, mutual, collaborative relationships. Participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to follow the leadership of those directly impacted by the criminal legal system, which they often did through their personal relationships.

I came to learn more about participatory, non-hierarchical, and autonomous forms of organization that appealed to me, both for their offering of something potentially more effective than voting or non-profit work, and for the joy in community that they seemed to invite (Scout). [Abolition is] a lot about relying on the wisdom of the community and so practically the way I make decisions [about state engagement] is I listen to these leaders that I've already sort of discerned are in line with my values, pass the vibe check, we have a relationship, I trust them (Elle). When we know that what we're trying to do is create a better community for our city or create a better living for the people we love, whatever our personal reason for being part of the movement is, we should be more centered around that rather than super particular about ideology or the way we go about things (Manu).

[And] the more that I'm involved in organizing and showing up and building my own practice and solidarity, the more I build relationships with folks who have had experience in the system, who have had a loved who have had experience in the system, and the more you learn about how that system works and how fucked up, it really is (Ace)- just writing to many hundreds of incarcerated folks and having a sense of the lived experience of those folks (David)- and so I think just the experience of being in the movement, being in the trenches, doing the

work, is probably what has the greatest impact on my ideology or how I approach my work (Ace).

[Another consideration I make is] can we follow the lead of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated folks and directly impacted communities and sort of see- what they want, and where their needs are (David). And you know that's not always straightforward, either because you know, usually there's varying opinions within any given geographical or identity based community (Ace). [But], to say that, like oh it doesn't matter because there's going to be violence, no matter you know who's voted into office but to follow the leadership of directly impacted folks who can tell you: 'this is like realistically, this is going to impact my life if this happens so can you help me make sure that, like that doesn't happen, and this happens instead.' (Ace)

[So-] what do the people most directly impacted by these systems or this decision that I'd be making, how do they feel about it? What is it that they want? And I think that, very often, I also make those decisions based on you know my relationships with real people and I guess based on those relationships having a better understanding of the impact of those decisions (Ace). You know folks of many ethnicities from many regions of the country, almost exclusively poor people, so all of that is like been a very concrete and transformative experience in my life to just learn about like how people ended up in prison, who these people are, you know, it's obviously a humanizing experience, (David) [because] ultimately, social movements are made with relationships, and an intimate conversation that builds a deep relationship can get you a lot farther than a thin relationship with the hundreds of people who may listen to you (Scout).

I focus on relationships more because I just really think that's what actually is going to get us to a place where we are stable enough as a movement to achieve the goals that we want (Manu) And I think that even if something is a success in terms of its its material results, if its' implemented from the top down there are still going to be intrinsic problems (Andrew). Part of abolition is that it's about communities, it's not about individuals necessarily right, like this is something that we do together and so it's not actually about me as an individual like knowing what to do (Elle).

Appendix I: Interview Schedule

Before I began the interview, I defined institutional politics as: "political activity that involves engaging with formal establishments, institutions, or behaviors which are associated with state power. Such activities could involve voting, running for office, advocating for legislative reforms, and more. "

- How did you choose to go into this work? Why? Any particular influence on your work?
- What kind of work do you currently do?

"I would like to start by asking you about your thoughts related to interacting with elected officials.."

- "Picture a world that is similar to ours, but you are able to set aside any resource constraints-"
    - What would your opinion be about voting or civic participation? Is it something that you would ideologically encourage?
    - Would you ever sit on a government committee, advise an elected official, or sit on a task force related to public safety? Why or why not?
    - Would you ever consider running for office?

"I would now like to talk about the relationship between the state, state institutions, or the government, and the long-term goal of abolition.."

- Do you think there are some ways in which participating in institutional politics can help the long-term goal of abolition? If so, how?
- Do you think the state or state institutions should play a role in promoting the long-term goal of abolition?
    - If so, what kind?

"I would now like to talk about the more 'short term' reforms of the Prison Industrial Complex- whether you pursue them or not-, especially those that would require interacting with the state."

- Do you ever feel like short term reforms stand in the way of the long term goal of abolition, or that there is a tension between the two? If so, what do you do in such cases?
    - What happened? What did you do?

- What are the kind of principles that you follow? Is there a principle that you follow?
- Do you think there is a way to work with some state institutions without reinforcing the bad aspects of it?
- If so, which aspects of the state?

"**I now want to talk about how you communicate with different people in order to reach your goals."**

- Imagine you are lobbying for a bill, or helping to create community based alternatives for police, or working towards some different goal- When you speak to people about that abolitionist project, do you feel the need to change the language you use, or the narrative you portray in order to get more public support?
  - Does that change with different people or different figures?
  - Why or why not do you care? Any specific ideology that influences your thinking?

"I would like to wrap up and talk about your general ideology around choosing to interact with the state as a PIC abolitionist"

- When should abolitionists engage with the state, and what factors influence that decision? How do we decide when to engage with the state?
  - Are there some situations in which abolitionists should never engage with institutional politics? Some when abolitionists must?

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