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Reimagining the Movement to End Gender Violence: Anti-racism, Prison Abolition, Women of Color Feminisms, and Other Radical Visions of Justice (Transcript)

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TRANSCRIPT^o

CONVERGE! REIMAGINING THE MOVEMENT TO END
GENDER VIOLENCE SYMPOSIUM:

Keynote—Reimagining the Movement to
End Gender Violence: Anti-racism, Prison
Abolition, Women of Color Feminisms, and
Other Radical Visions of Justice

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI SCHOOL OF LAW

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I. INTRODUCTION

Good Morning. Let me briefly thank the conference planners; a long list of people has been involved in this both from the University of Miami Law School, but also from the community—especially Donna Coker, Sabrina Segura, Marcia Olivo, and Leigh Goodmark—who seem

^o This transcript has been edited from its original transcription for clarity.

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to have pulled together an amazing group of people, conspiring with each other to imagine “reimagining.” Thank you for inviting us here. Thank you for the logistics. Thank you to the interpreters. Thank you to the students. It is amazing what you have been able to do. Second, thank you to the co-sponsors. Conferences are always better when lots of people put their energy into it and lend their credibility. Thank you for making this opportunity for all of us.

Thank you to the members of the Plenary who will follow my talk. They are an amazing group of people who are going to offer some reactions to some of the things that I say, as well as talk about their own incredibly valuable experiences. They will challenge us to reimagine. Thank you to all of you for coming, for answering this call to reimagine the movement to end gender violence. I recognize that you left your work, maybe you left your families or other people important to you; you could be other places instead of being here. One of the other places we could be is in New York at the Black Women’s Blueprint¹ event which is a really exciting event honoring Barbara Smith and her activism. I am glad you chose this place to be—to share your ideas, to participate in panels, in workshops, and in hallway corner conversations about what we need to do better. Because we really are here, I think, to talk about doing our work better.

Since you decided to come here, I made some assumptions about you as I was preparing my talk. I assume that you came because you read the call and identified with some of the themes: the themes of structural inequality and gender violence and the need to mobilize GLBTQ communities to respond to gender violence. I assume you came because you care about alternatives to the criminal legal system, or thinking about gender violence as a human rights violation, and other kinds of radical propositions that the call announced. And to me, that says a lot about who you are because you are interested in those themes. But, I also assume that you came because you are interested in the process of reimagining. You came because you are willing to be challenged and to challenge back. I assume that you are committed to looking honestly, more honestly than is often the case, at this so-called “anti-violence movement.” I assume that you are disappointed in yourselves and your organizations. I assume some of you feel alienated from that work. You think about the work, talk about the work, but when you actually *do* the work, there is a sense of disconnect. I assume you are frustrated by the

¹ See *TFW at Black Women’s Blueprint’s Fourth Annual Mother Tongue Monologues*, THE FEMINIST WIRE (Feb. 10, 2014), <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/02/tfw-at-black-womens-blueprints-fourth-annual-mother-tongue-monologues/>.

seemingly endless stories of degradation and abuse and our seemingly endless failure to respond to them. I know that some of you are annoyed by the rhetoric and that you are tired of the lack of action. Because I made those assumptions about who you are and why you came, and because you could be other places, I feel particularly honored to be given this opportunity. I feel humbled and I feel an unusual responsibility to speak some truths. I think you are just the people to help “course correct” as we rebuild our reimagined justice movement. Indeed, much of what I know I learned from the people in this audience. Much of what I hope to be as a social justice activist is inspired by the things we will talk about in the next few days. So my goal this morning is to dignify you and your commitment as well as to frame some of the issues that I bring to thinking about radical justice work.²

Many of those issues actually came from you, from being among you for so long in this struggle. I refer specifically to my sisters from INCITE!,³ my brothers and sisters from IDVAAC,⁴ A CALL TO MEN,⁵ Praxis,⁶ NCADV,⁷ YWEP,⁸ CARA,⁹ and from many other groups. More

² I consider myself an “insider-outsider” in the anti-violence movements that I am describing in this talk. Therefore, through the talk I use the term “we” to signal my involvement while at the same time my critique of the work. In other places, I use “we” to indicate the women of color who I work with and feel ultimately accountable to politically and personally as an activist in this work.

³ See *About INCITE!*, INCITE!, <http://www.incite-national.org/page/about-incite> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (“INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans people of Color Against Violence is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue and grassroots organizing.”); *Dangerous Intersections*, INCITE!, <http://www.incite-national.org/page/dangerous-intersections> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015).

⁴ See INSTITUTE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY (IDVAAC), <http://www.idvaac.org/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (“[A]n organization focused on the unique circumstances of African Americans as they face issues related to domestic violence, including intimate partner violence, child abuse, elder maltreatment, and community violence.”).

⁵ See A CALL TO MEN, <http://www.acalltomen.org/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (“A CALL TO MEN is a leading national violence prevention organization providing training and education for men, boys and communities.”).

⁶ See THE PRAXIS PROJECT, <http://www.thepraxisproject.org/about> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (“The Praxis Project is a nonprofit movement support intermediary and an institution of color that supports organizing and change work at local, regional and national levels.”).

⁷ See THE NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, <http://www.ncadv.org/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (“The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), has worked since 1978 to make every home a safe home.”).

⁸ See YOUNG WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT PROJECT, <https://ywepchicago.wordpress.com/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (“The Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP) is a

generally, I drew ideas from thirty or more years working in state coalitions against domestic violence and sexual assault and from work with national organizations, some of which no longer exist. I worked in local programs in Chicago and before that in New York, and with women in prisons. Some of the ideas I learned from those places give me a long list of things that we have done well in our movement to end gender violence. We have a number of long standing intervention programs where people who are hurt can turn to for help. We have broadened those programs in an impressive way to respond not only to women, but to all people who are harmed by gender violence, including trans people, queer people, gender non-conforming people, and sometimes men. I think we can feel good about the exciting national conferences that have occurred. We can feel good about the adoption of some public policies that have changed in favor of gender equity. We can feel good about the increase in public awareness about the rates of gender violence and its causes and consequences. We can feel good about a kind of academic legitimacy, which means that books are published; journals, feature articles, and documentaries are made; Ph.D. dissertations are written. These are products that we can feel good about that have an audience in the mainstream world of teaching. We can feel good, in some ways, about that work that is supported by resources from individuals, from corporations, from foundations, and from the state.

I also have some ideas about what we have done wrong and paradoxically they are some of those same things that I listed as things we can feel good about. Our alliance with some funding sources has simply backfired because they have required us to limit who we serve and what issues we take on, creating a kind of dependency on the funding sources that we think of as the “Not for Profit Industrial Complex.”¹⁰ We should not feel good about that. We have been preoccupied with a kind of national legitimacy that has distracted our movement at times, focusing attention more on celebrations and celebrities than on the pernicious crisis of everyday routine violence and the abuse that characterizes the lives of hundreds of thousands of people

member based social justice organizing project that is led by and for young people of color who have current or former experience in the sex trade and street economies.”).

⁹ See COMMUNITIES AGAINST RAPE AND ABUSE (CARA), <http://cara-seattle.blogspot.com/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (“CARA is a Seattle-based 501(c)(3) grassroots organization that promotes a broad agenda for liberation and social justice while prioritizing anti-rape work as the center of our organizing.”).

¹⁰ See INCITE!, *Beyond the Non Profit Industrial Complex*, <http://www.incite-national.org/page/beyond-non-profit-industrial-complex> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (discussing the “not for profit industrial complex”).

around the world. We should not feel good about that. We should not feel good about public policy and academic work that is the result of compromised relationships with people in power. We quite literally purchased our way into legitimacy by selling ourselves; we purchased our way into a set of neoliberal assumptions. The neoliberal assumptions are that on the one hand, the state should not be obligated to take care of people, while on the other hand, the state should be obligated to control, correct, and punish people. So the neoliberal project is to pull back from state obligations for care and replace it with a state obligation or an imperative to control.¹¹ We should not feel good about that. We have been part of that.

We have been co-opted and as a result, delegitimized and isolated from people who would be allies, who could help us in reimagining our work. We have been alienated from them because of positions that we have taken or not taken including positions on poverty and welfare reform, on the rights of domestic workers, on the removal of Native children from their families, on the economic crisis, and on war. Now, these failures surely have hurt our work. They have made us feel frustrated, alienated, mad at each other at some point, but more importantly these failures have made violence worse for some women.

What distinguishes what we did right from what we did wrong are three simple things: power, privilege, perspective. For many people the work has saved lives. Hundreds of thousands of women surely will credit, rightly or wrongly, this movement for their freedom. But others will describe the way that our work, yes, *our work*, has created danger and a whole new set of harms that they are now vulnerable to. It is this insidious way that power and privilege, whether you have it or not, and your perspective based on the power and privilege that you have, work together in our movement in ways that we thought might end violence for some, but has actually created harm for others. I think we came to course correct on that point. That is the reimagining that we need to do. That is why I called my talk *Reimagining the Movement to End Gender Violence: Anti-racism, Prison Abolition, Women of Color Feminisms, and Other Radical Visions of Justice*. You see I think we need to not just reimagine our work for some kind of esoteric reason that has to do with us feeling good about ourselves. I think we need to do it because people's lives depend on it.

First, I am going to talk about the need for a more robust, honest analysis of racism in our movement. Second, I am going to talk about

¹¹ See generally BETH E. RICHIE, *ARRESTED JUSTICE: BLACK WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND AMERICA'S PRISON NATION* (2012).

what a women of color feminist analysis or perspective or set of principles can offer that is a more promising, more radical approach to reimagining our work. Third, I am going to talk about prison abolition as the most direct path toward justice, one that offers us the best possibility of redemption of our radical roots. To me, the prison abolition frame provides a chance to talk about how to reframe the work to end gender violence as work against the patriarchal carceral state, and in particular the architecture of racism and related forms of oppression upon which the carceral state is built. I am going to say that again. To me, prison abolition represents a chance to think about the work to end gender violence and how **it needs to be reframed as work against the patriarchal carceral state,** and the architecture of racism and related forms of oppression upon which that patriarchal carceral state is built. That is the reimagining that will be truly radical and transformative.

II. AN HONEST ANALYSIS OF RACISM IN THE MOVEMENT

So my journey towards becoming a prison abolitionist as an antiviolence activist began many years ago, more than thirty years ago. A group of women of color and I, who were living in New York City, started to engage with a predominantly African-American and Latino organization to try to advance an analysis of gender violence under the rubric of racial justice work. We were naïve in thinking that because people talked about justice and framed their work as being about liberation that issues of gender and sexuality would be included in that work. **We were surprised to find ourselves constantly struggling with men and male identified community leaders, all of whom were people of color, who resisted our attempts to intervene in what we considered to be problematic politics around issues of gender and sexuality within the context of racial justice work. It was that same year that I went to my first conference sponsored by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There I met for the first time the dynamic, radical, feminist activists who were building a grass roots movement to respond to violence against women. Their analysis of gender and inequality was powerful and it resonated deeply with those of us who were there. It resonated deeply with the political work that we were trying to do in Harlem, except that the emerging feminist analysis did not incorporate an understanding of race, class and equality.** We were reassured at the Women of Color Institute that there were people like us who had a more intersectional analysis of the problem—an analysis that was more consistent with our own experiences. We did not read about an intersectional analysis, we *lived* an intersectional life. I was immediately

drawn to the national efforts of women of color to both challenge the white dominated feminist anti-domestic violence group to relinquish some of the hold that they had on the growing resources for anti-violence work and to challenge patriarchal assumptions in the communities of color that we lived in. It was an exciting time for me to be growing up as a black, feminist, anti-violence community activist. The anti-violence movement felt to me at the time like a stimulating environment—the place to work out this anti-violence, racially informed, class conscious praxis.

We had very high expectations of both our communities and the white feminist anti-violence movement. Our work was deeply informed by the real life stories from the streets, our homes, and our community-based organizations. These were stories of women who were racial justice activists who had been raped, beaten, stalked, and kidnapped while engaged in that work. Our work was also deeply informed by the sisters of color who were working in white dominated feminist organizations who felt like power was constantly taken from them, and that they were disrespected and disregarded. We were running from place to place trying to make sure that people were doing right by us and our experiences. We believed—now remember this was thirty years ago—that it was possible for a women of color feminism—the experiences of women of color and the leadership of women of color—to merge the struggle for racial justice and the struggle to end gender violence.

Here's the point of me telling you that story. Women of color came to this work because the movement's "justice" rhetoric promised us that our leadership would be recognized and supported. We believed that promise. We really did believe it, and we dug in because we thought that the work would embrace our lives and our contributions. What we found then is what we still find now: a pernicious form of racism in the movement to end gender violence. This reality does not make sense because it is inconsistent with what the movement says we believe in. That is, in practice, the movement to end gender violence does not see the links between gender oppression, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, able bodied-ism, and any of the other forms of oppression that women of color experience, not uniquely, but in very particular ways.

It was quite frankly at this point when I was preparing my remarks that I started to have a hard time because I realized that nothing is really very new about this omission. I do not have much more to say. I have

been saying this; it is on the INCITE! website;¹² many of you have written books about this for years. So in some ways, I wanted to say I cannot come to this conference because I do not have anything new to say. What we got right was a profoundly important universal essentialized analysis of gender and how it causes violence and degradation. We got that right. What we got wrong was we did not even think much about how gender is nuanced, complicated, contextualized and challenged by other identities. We did not think about this in a serious way. So we cannot respond to the violence because we did not think about the violence of poverty or homophobia or cultural genocide.

Now some of you are thinking, “But we did do some that.” We *did* do some of that. We have some tokenized color in the gender analysis, but what we did not do is to include it in the real work. We did not do the real work of challenging and changing structural oppression that inflicts so much violence on so many people. As a result, white women still have the power to define which problems are real—very particular forms of violence caused by individuals in certain contexts. Because of those definitions, our movement subscribes to a very narrow understanding of who is entitled to protection, to services, to resources, and to grants. The more you fit in, the more married you are—and I am talking about queer marriage, too—the more heterosexual you are, the more American you are, the more legal you can prove yourself to be, the more *temporarily* poor you can prove yourself to be, the fewer felony convictions you have, the more you are going to be entitled to the attention, resources, and support of this movement.

So the work that emerges from that narrowed definition of what counts as gender violence is still very closely aligned with narrow state practices and policies such as mandatory arrest. Human trafficking, defined in a certain way, may be resolved if you believe that it is only certain people who are impacted by that problem. Young trans kids for example, queer women, disabled people, people that are not of legal status, and others who do not fit in that definition are not only left vulnerable, but are now targeted by the widening net of what we call the prison industrial complex. That explains to me why as a movement we have not joined the FREE MARISSA NOW¹³ mobilizing campaign to rally

¹² INCITE!, *supra* note 3.

¹³ See FREE MARISSA NOW, <http://www.freemariSSANOW.org/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (providing more information regarding activism around Marissa Alexander’s case). Several of the conference attendees were active on Marissa’s behalf including CONVERGE! co-chair, Marcia Olivo; Alisa Bierria; Aleta Alston-Touré; and Carrie Bettinger-Lopez. At the time of the conference, Alexander had won her appeal and was facing a new trial. She was subsequently granted a plea deal for time served (three years),

behind Marissa Alexander's case. She was denied immunity under Florida's "stand your ground" law.¹⁴ She attempted to defend herself and was sentenced to twenty years in prison for firing a warning shot at the ceiling while she was being assaulted. This narrow definition of gender violence explains to me why we are not vocal opponents of the massive deportation policies that this current administration is so deeply invested in. It explains why we have made no moves to think about solidarity with the people of Palestine who are living as virtual prisoners in an apartheid state—a whole nation in an abusive relationship. It explains why white women still are credited with discovering notions that women of color have been strategizing around for years, as is the case of ONE BILLION RISING¹⁵ and *Orange is the New Black*.¹⁶ It is why we buy into a particular analysis of human trafficking, as I said before, that results in the arrests of trans and queer young people who are involved in the sex industry.

None of this happened by accident. We made strategic decisions nearly thirty years ago not to include race, class, ethnicity, age, and other variables in our analysis of gender violence. We adopted the *everywoman* analysis.¹⁷ The *everywoman* analysis was the one we used when we stood in front of groups and said, "Any woman can be a battered woman"; "Rape can happen to any woman." We said it over and over again in part because we wanted to make sure that violence against women was not heard as a stigmatized set of experiences of communities of color. The good news is that they believed us that it could happen to any woman or every woman. When they believed us they said, "You mean it can happen to our people? Our girls? Our wives? Our daughters? We better do something about that." We gave the power to them to protect their girls. When we did that, we said, "Those women are the only ones who need resources and supports; they are the only ones who should be researched and written about." We did that. We never course corrected that. We thought that we could work within mainstream anti-violence movements to reform them. We thought that we could keep our

which included probation requiring her to wear an ankle bracelet for two years. She was released on January 27, 2014. See FREE MARISSA NOW, <http://www.freemariissanow.org/>.

¹⁴ See FLA. STAT. § 776.013 (colloquially known as "stand your ground" law).

¹⁵ See ONE BILLION RISING, <http://www.onebillionrising.org/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) ("One Billion Rising is the biggest mass action to end violence against women in human history.").

¹⁶ See *Orange is the New Black*, Creator Jenji Kohan (Netflix television series 2013–2014), <http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/70242311?locale=en-US> (describing the Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*, regarding the prison experiences of an upperclass, white female inmate).

¹⁷ RICHIE, *supra* note 11, at 90 (describing the "everywoman" analysis).

strength and keep our righteousness; we could keep our energy clear; we could change broad systems. We did not say that we need an alternative—at least we did not say that until we founded INCITE! We thought that we could work *within* the system to make it better. As we evolved from a grass-roots activist based movement, we credited ourselves because we won the mainstream, but guess what? *We lost the movement.*

There is still something very important to be learned from THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: RADICAL WRITINGS BY WOMEN OF COLOR.¹⁸ It is worth re-reading because there is still this bridge called our backs in this work. We need to step back or step over to a different kind of place. We need to think about women of color as the *center* of this work, not add-ons, or special projects, or unique issues, or communities to be outreached to, or voiceless women that somehow the white savior complex needs to rescue. Women of color feminisms give us an opportunity to say that the subordinated bodies, the lives that are the most disaffected and the most harmed, the places where violence is most severe, need to be positioned as the original site of the struggle, the place from which the broadest liberation can come.

III. PRINCIPLES OF WOMEN OF COLOR FEMINISMS

So that is my second major point: our movement would be stronger, it would be more effective, it would be more accountable, if we reimagined it based on a set of principles related to women of color feminisms. Let me say what some of those principles are. First, oppression is interlocked. You can only account for the experiences of violence if you understand all of the ways that different kinds of violence reinforce each other. That is the analysis of intersectionality. Second, we need to embrace a sense that everyday knowledge and authority matters. We have to listen to survivors, survivors of *all* forms of violence, and believe that their truth matters. We need to not fit these truths into pre-existing paradigms, but instead believe the truth that is being shared with us. Third, we have to not just listen, hear, study, and write differently; we have to *do* things differently. So these are not rhetorical questions when I say, “Where are we on questions of trafficking, or Palestine, or immigration?” We have to do something about these issues. We have to engage with a different set of issues. That is praxis. We have to engage because we understand that these are examples of violence. We have to

¹⁸ See THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR (Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua eds., 1981).

do it because if we are committed to ending violence we have to see violence that is intersecting along all of the spheres of people's identities. Fourth, we have to really believe in strength, not weakness or vulnerability or "gaps." We have to really believe that we are strong, that we are ready, that we are able, and that we have the capacity to make change.

Feminisms of color posit that there are a series of dangerous intersections. The INCITE! webpage discusses these dangerous intersections.¹⁹ INCITE! recognizes that larger structures leave us vulnerable and that those larger structures *are* violence. Individual harm is furthered, allowed, enabled, and facilitated by those larger structures. The only way to challenge those larger structures is to take on the question of state power. Now I am going to borrow a little from a group called the Crunk Feminist Collective in Atlanta: "As a part of a larger women-of-color feminist politic, crunkness, in its insistence on the primacy of the beat, contains a notion of movement, timing, and of meaning making through sound . . ." ²⁰ That is especially productive for our work together. They continue:

Our relationship to feminism and our world is bound up in the proclivity for the percussive, as we divorce ourselves from 'correct' or hegemonic ways of being in favor of following the rhythm of our heartbeats. In other words, what others may call audacious and crazy, we call CRUNK because we are drunk off the heady theory of women of color feminism that proclaims that another world is possible. We resist others' attempts to stifle our voices, acting belligerent when necessary . . . Crunk feminists don't take no mess from nobody.²¹

That is a wonderful way of being.

So that is what this movement is missing: Crunk! We are missing crunk and those of us who might bring some crunk to this work. You hear in that definition of crunk a transparency, accountability, a sense of power and not powerlessness, and the sense of power to do something. You hear fearlessness and audacity. You hear a willingness to take risks

¹⁹ See INCITE!, *supra* note 3.

²⁰ See *Mission Statement*, CRUNK FEMINIST COLLECTIVE (CFC), <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/about/> (last visited Jan. 31, 2015) (CFC is a "community of scholars-activists" whose work is informed by "Crunk Feminism"; Crunk is a term initially referring to music that blends Hip-Hop and Southern Black music and culture.).

²¹ *Id.*

and to make mistakes and a sense of rhythm, of soulfulness that is active and engaged and disruptive. Surely it will bring a response. For me, Crunk is a way of suggesting that being an activist has to do with doing things with some rhythm. Here's what INCITE! taught me: we have to resist the pull towards legitimacy and we have to resist racist assumptions about women of color needing voice. We do not need voice, we need people to listen to our voices. We are deliberately silenced, but we *can* speak, we *do* speak, we *will* speak.

We have to do the hardest work first, not when we are done with the rest of the work. We have to do the hardest work first. To me it is a chance to take leadership from edginess, from energetic people who live in ways that are generative of enthusiasm for struggle. It would position different people in leadership at all levels, and different forms and kinds of leadership, as we reimagine not only our movement, but our movement's relationship to the world. We need to get crunky. I think a place to start that is with prison abolition.

IV. PRISON ABOLITION

As we evolved from grass-roots activism to more institutionally-based movement work within the mainstream, one of the most profound realignments of our social order occurred: the buildup of a prison nation. Right alongside of our evolution as an anti-violence movement came the conservative apparatus that was deeply committed to building a prison nation. That buildup fell right into the open arms, as if we were waiting for it, of the anti-violence movement that had aligned itself with the criminal legal system. There was a moment, I do not know if it was like fifteen minutes or maybe it was fifteen years, where our rhetoric, our resources, our approaches, our relationships with the criminal legal system meant that we were ripe for being taken advantage of by the forces that were building up a prison nation. In other words, they used us. They took our words, they took our work, they took our people, they took our money and said, "You girls doing your anti-violence work are right, it is a crime, and we have got something for that." There was really a moment where we said "cool, take it." Some of us said, "don't go there," but the train had already left the station. That is because there was not a Crunk women of color feminism. We would have done it differently.

Let me tell you what that buildup of a prison nation looks like. A prison nation, as I use it in my work, is a set of ideologies and public policy changes that led to a divestment from communities of much needed health and human services. This occurred because of the

neoliberal understanding that I talked about before: “People don’t need care, they need control.” A prison nation is when we start to blame people for their suffering. Whatever is wrong with them it is their fault. We even name policies “individual responsibility.”²² Prison Nation involves criminalizing people who cannot take care of themselves. We criminalize them by expanding criminal laws and by using harsher more aggressive law enforcement strategies for anything that violates social norms and threatens people in power. We invest hugely in programs such as special units of police departments to deal with gangs, to deal with guns, and to deal with domestic violence and sexual assault. We set up special courts to deal with addiction, truancy, and domestic violence and sexual assault. Now, I think as we reframe our work, we need to think about the buildup of a prison nation and how we were part of it, both in terms of actual prisons, but also in the growth of mechanisms of surveillance and control. Prison nation is connected with ideology and language about things like “safety” and “justice” and it means that people who are threats, or people who are causing harm, should not only be captured in prison, they should also be stigmatized, devalued, and dehumanized. So poor people become “undeserving,” and then we set up laws that make welfare fraud a major crime problem, and then we put police officers or security guards in welfare offices to look for people who are cheating welfare. So we turn people into criminals. I mean that in quite the literal sense; there are seven million people who are under the control of the criminal legal system in this country today.²³ As you know, this country houses twenty-five percent of the world’s prisoners.²⁴ That is the largest incarceration rate in the world.²⁵ But we not only have the largest incarceration rate in the world, people in United States’ prisons are incarcerated in harsher conditions for longer periods of time,

²² See Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105 (1996) (establishing “welfare reform” legislation that had the effect of dramatically reducing benefits justified as necessary to make recipients take “personal responsibility” for their well-being).

²³ LAUREN E. GLAZE AND DANIELLE KAEBLE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, CORRECTIONAL POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2013 (2014), available at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus13.pdf>.

²⁴ The World Prisoner Population List: ROY WALMSLEY, INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR PRISON STUDIES, WORLD PRISON POPULATION LIST (10th ed. 2013), available at http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/prisonstudies.org/files/resources/downloads/wpp1_10.pdf.

²⁵ ROY WALMSLEY, INT’L CTR. FOR PRISON STUDIES, *World Prison Population List* (9th ed. 2011), available at <http://www.idcr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/WPPL-9-22.pdf> (The U.S. prison population rate of 743 per 100,000 is highest among the 218 independent countries and dependent territories included in the study, followed by Rwanda (595), Russia (568), Georgia (547), U.S. Virgin Islands (539), and Seychelles (507)).

farther and farther away from their communities, for less serious offenses than almost any country in the world.²⁶ And guess what? Those places are increasingly incarcerating women, most of whom should have been able to turn to our services and support, but instead they were defined out of who is a legitimate victim.

There is important new evidence of a decrease in incarceration rates in this country, particularly, decreasing incarceration rates of black people, and particularly black women.²⁷ I initially thought that this is some good news. But you do not need a prison to build up a prison nation. You do not have to keep people in institutions. In fact, what you really want to do is send them out of the institutions but still control them by not providing them with any care; or by monitoring them with the use of ankle bracelets or parole or probation officer oversight; or cutting them off of welfare; or watching for the opportunity to take their kids from them. You do not need a building for that. So the state can release people from prison, without adequate resources for their care, while continuing to keep them under state control, and then fill the now available prison space with another group of vulnerable people: immigrants.²⁸ This is why we have to shift our analysis to prison abolition.

There are some people who would argue that the work to end gender violence has benefited from both the ideological and policy shifts associated with the buildup of the prison nation. Some people may have benefited from harsher punishments against violence perpetrators. There are some people who might have benefited because of new technology that the prison nation has developed. Maybe some of the new laws have protected some people. And maybe the fundamentally conservative “law and order” agenda has made some people safe for a short time. I think for us, the challenge is to say that this is insufficient. These policies may have benefitted a few people, but they did not fundamentally change anything. These policies may have removed an abusive person from access to someone they were harming, but that did not do anything to make the fundamental changes necessary to end gender violence. What

²⁶ See, e.g., AMNESTY INT’L, USA: THE EDGE OF ENDURANCE (2012), available at <http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/edgeofendurancecaliforniareport.pdf> (specifically discussing prison conditions in California’s security housing units).

²⁷ MARC MAURER, THE SENTENCING PROJECT, THE CHANGING RACIAL DYNAMICS OF WOMEN’S INCARCERATION (2013), available at http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_Changing%20Racial%20Dynamics%202013.pdf.

²⁸ See Maria Rodriguez et al., *Panel on Immigrant Rights, Women and Gender Violence: Structural Violence and Organizing Strategies*, 5 U. MIAMI RACE & SOC. JUST. L. REV. 335 (2015).

we need to do is think about how to replace that very small, temporary, ineffective feeling of safety with something better, something that is sustained, and something that is connected to a broader vision of what our work needs to be. That is why I think our work as prison abolitionists becomes so important.

Now there are a number of people who remind me about the dangerousness of anti-violence work that does not confront a prison nation. These women are some of the women I talk about in my book, *ARRESTED JUSTICE: BLACK WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND AMERICA'S PRISON NATION*.²⁹ One is Tiawanda Moore in Chicago.³⁰ Let me tell you a little about her. I will give you a short version of a very long story, a very rich life, a very complicated life—some of it complicated in a good way, some of it complicated in not such a good way. Tiawanda was assaulted by her boyfriend and called the police. The police came; we might feel good about that. When the police got there they separated her from the person that was harming her. During the separation, the police officer who was talking with her asked her for her phone number. He was propositioning her. She took offense to that. She had a little crunk feminism in her. She took offense and filed a complaint. She filed a complaint, which of course they took offense to. She took offense to them taking offense. She decided that she was going to take offense and document what they were doing by recording the conversation with her cell phone, which of course they *really* took offense to. You know what? Recording a phone call without the other party's knowledge is against the law. So now she has gone from being a relatively empowered survivor, to being a criminal. In some ways, we created the opportunity for that to happen. Tiawanda's story is one of hundreds of thousands of examples of what is happening, probably right now, with the ways that our engagement with the criminal legal system is affecting women. All of our resources meant that she ends up trapped by that same system. If I were her, I would turn around and look at us and say,

What were you thinking? You do not know anything about what happens in black communities in Chicago on the south side when you call the police. What were you thinking? You told me to do all of these things as if I had power over this huge prison nation that you participated in building up. Why would you expect that I could have gotten anything from this?

²⁹ See RICHIE, *supra* note 11.

³⁰ *Id.* at 99–100.

There are other stories like that. You only need to look at who is in jails, who is in prisons, who is under the surveillance of the state. What did we do to contribute to their being in harm's way? These stories, hundreds of thousands like them, are happening while we are here reimagining. They remind us of what Audre Lord told us, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."³¹ It never, never will and we have to remember that. We cannot reform the tools; they will never dismantle the master's house.

Prison abolition represents a chance to think critically and rationally about the work to end gender violence. Our work needs to be reframed as a movement against the patriarchal carceral state that is so dangerous to so many people. It needs to include tearing down the architecture of racism and the related forms of oppression upon which that carceral state is built. That is the way that we will have a truly radical justice oriented movement. That will protect survivors and that will make us strong, whole, and ready. Prison abolition is an aspiration, it is a dimension of our work that means that we have to be more than rhetorically committed to de-carceration, but actively engaged in divesting ourselves from the racist state that is keeping people in cages. It means that we have to rebuild communities based on a notion of women of color feminist principles. It means that we have to open up our arms, and open up our organizations, open up our analysis to the strength that can come from that. We will be more relevant that way. Communities will be stronger and that will save lives.

Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock told us in the first line of *Ella's Song*, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest."³² I remember hearing Sweet Honey in the Rock sing that song at the first NCADV (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence) conference that I went to in Milwaukee. Never did I imagine at that moment that I would work for thirty years in a movement and see so much change and yet so little change. I never imagined that we would have lost so many people. I think about Susan Schechter, Radhia Jabber, Sandra Camacho, and Ellen Pence. We have lost so many people. But there were so many people who we would be able to call our allies if we took a different direction in what we define as our work. I never imagined that I would learn so much from working with women caught in the legal system. Some of the best lessons of what's right and what's wrong, I learned

³¹ Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, in *SISTER OUTSIDER: ESSAYS AND SPEECHES BY AUDRE LORDE* 110, 110–114 (1984).

³² See Bernice Johnson Reagon, *Ella's Song*, available at <http://www.bernicejohnsonreagon.com/ella.shtml>.

from women in jail and in prison. I did not imagine that they, as my allies in this work, would teach me to be a prison abolitionist. But that is what happened.

V. CONCLUSION

So we are here now to reimagine, to remember that we are burdened with a very particular responsibility that comes from our success and from the ways that we have screwed up. It is time now, I think, to become anti-racist, women of color feminisms-inspired, prison abolitionists. I think that is demanded of us because of the mistakes we have made. Indeed, we who believe freedom can no longer wait. Thank you.