

QUEER AS IN ABOLITION NOW!

Marquis Bey and Jesse A. Goldberg

This special issue of *GLQ* begins and stays with this conviction as its premise and conclusion, one that is both heightened by and exceeds the boundaries of the present moment of crisis that is the COVID-19 pandemic: Prison abolition is a project of queer liberation and queer liberation is an abolitionist project. No ifs, ands, or buts.

The occasion for the topic of this special issue—queerness and abolition, inflected, necessarily, through one another—began in coalition. We, the editors, forged this special issue in conversation, in intellectual and political community both within and in excess of academic spaces. Such collective struggle is characteristic of the kind of ethos we hope the entries in this issue exude: one that articulates the radical tenor of abolition and queerness, where abolition is not affixed to certain “bad” institutions but is a pervasive call for the eradication of carcerality; where queerness is not merely a non-het, non-cis “identity” but a political posture subversive of normativity, hegemony, and power.

Indeed, the pandemic has highlighted the necropolitical mechanics of jails and prisons. According to a recent study published in *JAMA* (Saloner et al. 2020), “The COVID-19 case rate for prisoners was 5.5 times higher than the US population case rate”—and that is based on data that the researchers acknowledge likely undercounted both cases and deaths. While there is much to be written about COVID-19 and the prison-industrial complex (PIC), what we emphasize here is the way that this fact of higher case and death rates among the incarcerated indexes the fundamental functions of carceral institutions: containment and elimination.

In the face of this, activists around the globe are connecting the biopolitics of the pandemic to issues of climate justice, racial justice, gender justice, and disability justice that span a *longue durée* of racial capitalism made possible by extractive genocidal colonialism and chattel slavery.¹ We hear the phrases “abolition now” and “defund the police” uttered more frequently and in more main-

stream venues than at any previous time during the twenty-first century. With renewed energy drawing on a radical politics that has always been present in queer life, we see more public debates about excluding cops from Pride marches.

It is in this context of attending to simultaneously the heightened precarities of the immediate now and the accumulating histories of both retrenched hegemony and lived refusals of the terms of order that we offer “Queer Fire: Liberation and Abolition.” This issue is aimed at dislodging the comfortable logic of “the most vulnerable,” or “the most affected,” or “the disproportionately impacted” that often governs common discourse about the PIC in regard to various modes of difference, including along the axes of gender and sexuality as they intersect with race, ethnicity, and disability. This issue is an attempt to push analyses of queer liberation and abolition past the observations that prisons disproportionately or especially harm queer people toward seriously, rigorously imagining and working toward liberatory futures without prisons, police, or the tyranny of colonial gender systems.

The carceral epistemology of the prison not only is similar to but also is, itself, a carceral epistemology of gender, as scholarship and activism beyond liberal mainstream spaces has been arguing for decades (Stanley and Spade 2012: 119–21). “Queer Fire” pivots from Judith Butler’s (2004: 1) insightful conditional, “if gender is a kind of doing,” and asks, “What if gender is a kind of prison?” Thus, the issue takes seriously the question of gender abolition and the often-unspoken gender of (carceral) abolition. Abolition and queerness, taken together, name the eradication of the current terms of order imposed by racial capitalism as an ongoing settler-colonial structure. As a capitalist and settler-colonial structure, the terms of order that queerness and abolition undermine must end, full stop. Alexandre Martins and Caia Coelho, in this issue, make such an all-encompassing argument in their essay, “Notes on the (Im)possibilities of an Anti-colonial Queer Abolition of the (Carceral) World.” Collaboratively writing from and about Brazilian anti-colonial queer politics, they elaborate a definition of “the world” as a construct of colonialism. From there, they envision both the end of prisons and police *and*, in a forceful and committed sense, the end of gender, sexuality, class, and race as structures of “the world” as such.

While Martins and Coelho’s essay is unique in its explicit “abolition as a form of apocalypse” tenor, this spirit of setting queer fire to the current world—a present that is, according to José Esteban Muñoz (2009: 1), a “prison house”—in the process of building a new one is central to all of the articles in this issue. That is, if we understand the World to be a construct of colonialism, the essays in this issue collectively demonstrate how there are always worlds within the World; there

is building happening at the same time that razing is required. Abolition is always two-sided in this way, not dissimilar to the queer futurity that is then and there on the horizon and also here and now in moments of relation.

S.M. Rodriguez's "Queers against Corrective Development: LGBTSTGNC Anti-violence Organizing in Gentrifying Times" begins the issue by arguing that gentrification is a carceral mechanism. At the same time, by zeroing in on the "myth of the lesbian gentrifier" and attending to the simultaneous criminalization of race, gender, disability, and sexuality, gentrification emerges as a site where anti-carceral and queer analysis must necessarily meet, ultimately arriving in an elaboration of how queer-of-color organizers in Brooklyn, New York, model the queerness of abolitionist politics. Stephen Dillon's "I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies': Black Feminism, Vengeance, and the Futures of Abolition" continues Rodriguez's place- and space-conscious analysis by turning to the transnational scope of June Jordan's poetry. Dillon examines Jordan's mobilization of "black feminist vengeance" as a form of violence to open space for new ways of thinking. Far from offering an easy, reductive map of oppression and liberation, for Dillon,

Even as Jordan is "the history of rape," she is also the history of gendered violence against other women of color around the world. In her terms, she is the enemy of Iraqi women, of Palestinian women, of Nicaraguan women, of Guatemalan women, of indigenous women. And so, Jordan must become not only an enemy to the police . . . but also an enemy to the enemy that she is as well. Being an enemy is not ontological, but epistemological.

This insight resonates with the anti-colonial energies of Martins and Coelho's essay.

In their essay, Martins and Coelho analyze the distinctions between "hegemonic" and "minor" LGBT movements in Brazil, arguing for the necessity of anti-carceral queer politics that do not look to punishment apparatuses for queer justice. Just as their anti-colonial analysis echoes Dillon's readings of Jordan, their unflinching critique of carceral LGBT political movements dovetails with Alison Reed's "'We're Here! We're Queer! Fuck the Banks!': On the Affective Lives of Abolition," which "takes up the spatial and symbolic relationship between the Pride parade and the prison industrial complex" in order to "demonstrate the urgency of queer abolitionist constellations of affect." In so doing, Reed analyzes the affective terrain of organizing spaces, protest marches, and jail programming while staying with the messy difficulties of doing abolition work and building queer kinship within institutional spaces that are imbricated in carcerality.

Like Reed's reflections on her own navigation through carceral institutional spaces as an abolitionist, Lorenzo Triburgo and Sarah Van Dyck carefully attend to the ethics of making queer art that represents the lives of incarcerated people in their essay, "Representational Refusal and the Embodiment of Gender Abolition." Through imagistic modes of representation attempting to, paradoxically, image non- and un-representability, they meditate on their creation of prison abolitionist photographs that subvert connections between queerness, deviance, and criminality. Jaden Janak directly continues these threads on art and the politics of (trans) visibility from Triburgo and Van Dyck's essay, while taking up again the focus on space and place that Rodriguez, Dillon, Martins and Coelho, and Reed sustain, in "(Trans)gendering Abolition: Black Trans Geographies, Art, and the Problem of Visibility." Moving through autobiography, documentary film, and recorded music, Janak highlights the importance of art as a medium through which to consider the process of making Black trans (abolitionist) geographies.

Closing the issue is "A Trans Way of Seeing," an essay collaboratively authored by Kitty Rotolo and Nadja Eisenberg-Guyot, who are physically separated by the walls of jails and prisons. The essay meditates intimately, lovingly, and rigorously on trans identity, affinity, and community across prison walls. As they reflect on their kinship via a trans and abolitionist mutuality, the authors theorize transness in excess of a specific corporeal form and affix it to and as a modality of relation: transness becomes an abolitionist posture that brings people together on the grounds of how they resist, commune, practice, and struggle in coalition with the project of dismantling violence. Their theorizing of a trans way of seeing inflects the desire to destroy the Colonial World with the affects of love and leaves us with the provocation to continue envisioning freedom.

It turns out, the fundamental affect at the heart of queer fire, and thus a condition of possibility for forging the possible out of what the World deems impossible, may very well be abolitionist love.

Notes

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1. Throughout her work Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains how the drawing of such connections is how "abolition geographies" are built; this is especially clear in Gilmore 2018.

The numerous writers whose works are collected in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Stanley and Smith 2016) illustrate various analytic frameworks for understanding prison abolition as a queer politic specifically attendant to gender liberation as a horizon of trans politics. Angela Davis, throughout her work but especially in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) (chap. 4), as well as Beth Richie (2012) and Mariame Kaba (2021), explains clearly and definitively that prisons and police are enactors of, and therefore can never be tools for eliminating, gender violence. Liat Ben-Moshe (2020) expands analysis of carcerality through engagement with disability studies and activism. And a recent symposium in the journal *Antipode* titled “Abolition Ecologies” offers a number of ways of thinking about abolition as an ecological project—including an essay by Laurel Mei-Singh (2021) that critically and productively reflects on the struggles and possibilities for building abolitionist futures on a rapidly warming planet in partnership with indigenous communities.

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