The Fictions and Futures of Transformative Justice

A Conversation on Abolitionism, Science Fiction, and Alternative Justice Systems

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OCTAVIA'S Brood: *Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements*[1]—AK Press, 2015. *is a collection of 20 fantastical short stories and two essays written by organizers, activists, and changemakers. Rooted in the premise that "all organizing is science fiction," Octavia's Brood also believes that our movements for justice vitally need spaces where we start with the question "What is the world we want to live in?" rather than starting with the question, "What is a realistic win?" Nowhere is this more relevant and needed than when talking about prisons and alternatives to incarceration. This roundtable brings the two co-editors and three of the Octavia's Brood writers together to talk about their experience with prison abolition, science fiction, and transformative justice.*

Walidah Imarisha: What are y'alls definition of abolition? What is transformative justice? Are they the same thing?

Adrienne Maree Brown: I tend to think of abolition as one result of transformative justice: abolition is the end of prisons; transformative justice is the methods people use to uproot

injustice patterns in communities. I tend to think of abolition as a totality, and I think that can be tricky. People set out to abolish slavery and we ended up with the prison industrial complex because while there were surface and policy level shifts, the culture did not shift. That deep underlying racism and classism remains and is now roaring to the surface as we write this. So, while I identify as an abolitionist, I find speaking about the iterative tangible work of TJ makes more sense to me now — I don't simply want the prisons gone, I want a radically different way of interacting with each other to grow.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs: I learned both of those terms in the context of the organization Critical Resistance, and I learned abolition as a critical and generative term, and a movement with three main components: dismantle, change, build. That definition of abolition included the daily work of generating relationships, systems, and processes that produce peaceful, sustainable results that fully address the unaddressed fears, intergenerational trauma, and systemic violence that prisons, policing, and surveillance (the systemic external version, and the internalized versions) pretend to mitigate.

I think what adrienne is saying about the abolition of slavery is important, and it's actually what attracts me to abolition as a poetic term. It automatically invokes slavery–and the philosophy and practice of abolition targets enslaving practices in general, and points out that prison and policing are enslaving practices that are directly related to the history of U.S. chattel slavery.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: My standard definition of transformative justice is "any way of creating safety, justice, and healing for survivors of violence that does not rely on the state (by which I mean the prison industrial complex, the criminal legal system, foster care, children's aid, the psychiatric and disability prison industrial complex–e.g. psych hospitals, nursing homes, and extended care- Immigration, the TSA, and more) A movement created by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color feminist revolutionaries to free our people."

It's really important for me to state that transformative justice is a Black and Brown feminist movement because there's been a ton of recent efforts on the part of white radicals to whitewash away and erase the Black and Brown feminized labor, scholarship, and struggle

that creates these movements. I'm not just talking about the transformative justice movement of the last 20 years in North America; I'm talking about Mohawk Clan Mother law on Six Nations, the trans women of color sex workers like Miss Major, Sylvia P. Rivera, Mirha-Soleil Ross, who fought police at Stonewall and also fought back physically against transphobic violence on the street. This work we are doing is not new, and no, white punks did not invent everything.

I believe that you can't have transformative justice without prison abolition. If you think prisons, cops, and carceral-ableist institutions are fixable by giving them a sensitivity workshop, we don't have the same political vision of what we want and how to get there. Believing this means you're not looking at how what we experience, with policing and prisons in North America, comes directly from the Fugitive Slave Act, the Indian Act, the Mann Act, and various anti- Asian and anti-migrant/refugee laws–from S-COMM to White Canada and the Chinese Exclusion Act–as well as ableist laws like the Ugly Laws, and laws that criminalize sex workers' employment. All of those laws were created directly out of racist, colonial, ableist patriarchy and they all directly increase gender violence and policing.

For a lot of people, transformative justice means nonviolence. I disagree with this, because I believe that self-defense and armed movements for liberation can be part of achieving transformative justice.

Mia Mingus: To me, the two are intimately connected, but are not the same thing. Abolition is the ending of prisons, the prison industrial complex, and a culture of prisons (e.g. criminalization, punishment, disposability, revenge). Transformative justice is a way to respond to violence within our communities in ways that 1) don't create more harm and violence and 2) actively work to cultivate the very things that we know will prevent violence, such as accountability, healing, trust, connection, safety.

I understand abolition to be a necessary part of transformative justice because prisons, and the PIC, are major sites of individual and collective violence, abuse, and trauma. However, transformative justice is and must also be a critical part of abolition work because we will need to build alternatives to how we respond to harm, violence, and abuse. Just because we

shut down prisons, does not mean that these will stop. Transformative justice has roots in abolition work and is an abolitionist framework, but goes beyond abolishing prisons (and slavery) and asks us to end–and transform the conditions that perpetuate–generational cycles of violence such as rape, sexual assault, child abuse, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, intimate partner abuse, war, genocide, poverty, human trafficking, police brutality, murder, stalking, sexual harassment, all systems of oppression, dangerous societal norms, and trauma.

Walidah Imarisha: I've written that when I talk about prison abolition, people look at me like I just said aliens from outer space landed. What connections do you see between science fiction and abolition/transformative justice? What is illuminated when we use fantastical writing to talk about alternative systems of justice?

Adrienne Maree Brown: our work is to make the unimaginable feel tangible, become a longing. I have worked with organizers for years and we've found the edges of what we are building. In science fiction and visionary fiction it feels like we give ourselves permission to move beyond that edge. We can go to a moon where disability is embraced, or futures where we are somatically networked–or postcapitalism, as my fellow panelists did in Octavia's Brood. Beyond that edge we find solutions and more problems, which is also important to me in transformative justice–that it isn't utopian.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs: Yes. First of all, I would say that prison is an accurate name for our contemporary culture, and prison as culture presumes a certain set of problems and reinforces a dominant reaction in our imaginations. Sylvia Wynter talks about reservation–which is also an accurate name for our contemporary culture–meaning that at the same moment indigenous people are confined to reservations by the state, our imaginations are also confined. All of us. And, I would also say that the moments in which prisons became a dominant feature of the U.S., our imaginations (for all, not just those of us disproportionately imprisoned) also became imprisoned. The way we imagine work, our relationships, the future, family everything, is locked down.

I see science fiction as liberation work that allows our imaginations to live beyond prison. I think that's why so many folks in prison have loved Octavia's Brood and created their own

sci-fi collections. They have been seeking to write their way beyond prison for a long time.

Adrienne Maree Brown: We perpetuate the prison state for so many reasons; we internalize the narrative that we can't do any better than this and we become comfortable inside the limits, demanding someone else make the changes. Transformative justice is hard because it requires self-examination, being uncomfortable as things change.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: When I was a teenaged survivor of childhood sexual abuse and partner abuse within my family, some of the first places that gave me hope and visions for how violence and abuse could change were science fiction. I read Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time, Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed and Starhawk's The Fifth Sacred Thing before I turned 20, and they all had these incredible ideas for how rape culture could change. In their worlds, everyone was trained in self-defense and de-escalation, and there were systems of atonement, reparations and healing when violence did occur.
In contrast, mainstream survivor literature didn't have any visions for how sexual abuse and partner violence could end. Science fiction was this place of rich prefigurative survivor politics that backed up my dreams of creating and participating in anti-violence politics where my and other survivors visions were at the center of the work, not a side note.

Mia Mingus: The visions of transformative justice often feel sci-fi-fi to many–a world without child sexual abuse, a world free of sexual violence. We are building a reality that we have never seen before. We are asking people to flex their visioning and dreaming skills, something that is not readily supported in our society. This is especially true for my work with the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC) because we focus on child sexual abuse. So many people do not believe that child sexual abuse can be ended.

Transformative justice is about creativity and imagination. It is about not going with the status quo systems response and, instead, inventing new ways of being. It is about creating what you need with what you have. There are no blueprints or manuals for transformative justice because each incident, individual, and community will have different needs–necessarily so. I always say that this is one of TJ's greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses because we live in a society where people like to be told what to do; they like to

“look up” to someone; they feel more comfortable with the well trodden path and a “boss” or an “expert” with all the answers. Much of my transformative justice work has been about resisting this kind of culture and instead encouraging people to trust themselves and their instincts.

Walidah Imarisha: In her piece for the *Critical Resistance Abolition Now Anthology,* Alexis wrote: What if abolition isn’t a shattering thing, not a crashing thing, not a wrecking ball event? What if abolition is something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you? What if abolition is something that grows? All three of you have first-hand experience trying to create alternate systems of justice. If we are not just tearing down prisons and police as institutions, but growing something, what are we growing specifically? Mia, especially with your work around transformative justice with survivors of childhood sexual abuse, what seeds are sprouting to address so much trauma?

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: Transformative justice can be a multi-year, survivor-lead circle of people asking someone who has perpetrated abuse and harm to make specific changes and give them reparations. It can also be as small, and big, as interrupting some asshole harassing someone at the same bus stop as me. I think it’s important to say that because it is easy to get overwhelmed. It turns out that ending the prison industrial complex and creating something different with no money and a lot of unpaid femme of color labor is hard. I really appreciate the Everyday Abolition blog because it is a project dedicated to publishing everyday stories of many ways abolition could look like in daily life–those little, big moments of change.

In many transformative justice processes from hell I’ve witnessed, one of the problems is that everybody hits the ground running, totally on adrenaline mode, totally triggered: “We have to do something! Now!” and then they burn out. Bringing healing justice and disability justice principles into transformative justice–which could be anything from asking the ancestors for help in creating justice and transforming harm, to rituals for cleansing and protection when things are hard, to making sure people have their herbs and other supports for stress and anxiety–make all our justice richer, more cripped out, and more possible.

Mia Mingus: One of the things we are trying to grow in our work are the kinds of relationships, values, and practices that can concretely support transformative justice. We want the kind of community where any survivor could come forward about their experiences without having to fear being shamed and blamed, ostracized, not believed, harassed, or re-traumatized. The kind of community where people who have harmed and are trying to take accountability could be "out" about the harm they've done, without fear of violence or retaliation. Living in a rape culture, we are a long way from this. We also know that "communities" are made up of individual people and the relationships they have with each other; so we are asking people to grow their own skills and practices to be able to build the kinds of relationships with each other where, for example, we can talk about harm we've done, no matter how big or how small (e.g. "I used to bully other kids in school when I was younger," or "I think I might have sexually assaulted someone").

One of the ways we are doing this is by using our model of "pods." Your pod is made up of the people that you would call on if you experienced violence, whether you were targeted for violence or you were violent yourself or you witnessed violence. Most people have multiple pods because the people they would call on if they survived violence are often different than the people they would call on to support them in taking accountability for violence they've done or harm they've caused. We encourage people to think about who their pod people are (how much more sci-fi can we get?) and to grow and deepen their pod.

Our pod people are not necessarily our closest people because this is often where the violence is coming from. We challenge ourselves to actively build our own pods, rather than simply hoping other people will.

Adrienne Maree Brown: So many beautiful experiments! I included transformative justice as a core principle of emergent strategy, both because it aligns with what I notice in nature–that nothing is disposable–and because the only ways it works, that I've seen, are iterative, emergent. I have facilitated many meditations, grievances, conflicts, breakups… and so much of the work is about unlearning dishonesty, whether it's in the form of complete lies, half-truths, omissions, politeness. I have learned this in myself–the most egregious things I have done always rooted into some unspoken, unacknowledged pain. So I have started with myself, increasing radical honesty in my own life; this has been a focus of

my somatics work–learning to stay present in my body while I tell and or hear truth. It has shifted my political work; instead of helping people develop five-year plans, I often find myself supporting people to just be more honest in real time, to speak the truth of the connection (in the organization, network, relationship, family) to get better at tolerating the truth from others. The results are astounding: humans are capable of anything when we are honest–we have boundaries, work sustainably, do the work most needed by our communities (rather than the easiest funded or most media inducing), get out of unhealthy dynamics, feel seen and appropriately valued, participate in authentic intimacy. This is earth, water, fire, and air level stuff. Without these core connections, injustice flourishes.

Walidah Imarisha: Will Trump's election have impact on these visions of transformative justice, and the on-the-ground work being done to bring them about?

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasina: It means we need it more than ever because we really, really can't trust the system.

Adrienne Maree Brown: It's all so scary that a lot of us will drop our eyes from the horizon to the ground right in front of us, or actually tuck our heads in and just kind of roll forward hoping to survive. It's a daunting time. But: I think our survival depends on being able to hold both views, surviving the present, and supporting the most vulnerable with our eyes on the horizon, looking as far as we can, shaping our reality towards that. The threats now are universal–nuclear war, climate catastrophe–and none of us are served by short sight or normalizing this political moment. I also think that in our fear we get small, we get competitive, we get righteous. Division abounds. Leaning into transformative justice, complexity, unity, being ungovernable together–all of that will be important.

Walidah Imarish: What does a futuristic society rooted in the principles of abolition and transformative justice look like to you?

Mia Mingus: One of the things about visioning for transformative justice is that, after enough practice, you begin to learn that the most important thing is not to come up with a crystal clear vision with all the answers, but rather to embrace that as we envision new

worlds, that envisioning will inevitably change us, which will change our work and so on. You learn that envisioning is an emergent and evolving process that is constantly changing, like a river. One of the visions I have of a society rooted in abolition and transformative justice is that we would all be able to respond–even if it is not perfect–to violence, harm, and abuse in our communities. I envision a society that actively works to prevent violence, harm, and abuse and that understands mistakes as opportunities for growth, realignment, and clarity. I envision that we would truly live from the belief that "no one is disposable." I envision a society where we could get help from the people in our everyday lives and where we wouldn't have to leave our communities for healing, safety, or education; a society where we know our neighbors and ourselves, and where individual and collective healing are everyday parts of our lives.

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