



1:1 | True Leap Press / SoChi ABC
Prison Praxis Series

Stephen Wilson is a currently incarcerated, Black, queer writer, activist and student. For over two decades, he was active in the Ballroom community and work as an HIV-prevention specialist and community organizer. His work and practice inherit teachings from prison abolition, transformative and racial justice, Black feminist theory, and gender and queer liberation.

Specifically, he works to end cycles of poverty and incarceration that have plagued his community. He works to expose and dismantle the prison-industrial complex and to build a world in which we deal with harm without caging or exiling other people.

WHAT IS ABOLITION?

Critical Resistance's mission is to end the prison industrial complex (PIC). The PIC is a system that uses policing, courts, and imprisonment to "solve" problems. We don't agree that we need the PIC to keep us safe. Instead, we work to build safe and healthy communities that do not depend on prisons and punishment.

WHO WERE THE FIRST ABOLITIONISTS?

We take the name "abolitionist" purposefully from those who called for the abolition of slavery in the 1800's. Abolitionists believed that slavery could not be fixed or reformed. It needed to be abolished. As PIC abolitionists today, we also do not believe that reforms can make the PIC just or effective. Our goal is not to improve the system; it is to shrink the system into non-existence.

WHAT ABOUT PUBLIC SAFETY?

We all want safe communities. The question is how do we build safe communities? Is it by locking up and policing more and more people? Or is it by dealing with the causes of the harm that is called "crime" in our communities?

Even the worst kinds of harm do not happen without a reason. Putting people in cages does not solve any of the problems that lead to harm, like harmful drug use, poverty, violence, or mental illness. By separating people from their home communities, and isolating them in abusive and violent environments, these problems can even get worse. We take seriously the harms that happen between people. We believe that in order to reduce harm we must change the social and economic conditions in which those harms take place.

For example, providing drug users with health care and harm reduction strategies instead of locking them in cages helps reduce the harm that drug use might cause. When public funding is directed into policing and prisons, budget cuts for social programs, including women's shelters, welfare and public housing are the side effect. These cutbacks leave women less able to escape violent relationships. Focusing more energy on creating safe and stable conditions of policing and imprisonment reduces harm

Studies have shown that states with more prisons and prisoners do not have lower crime rates than other states. The PIC claims to be about safety and order. In reality, the PIC makes the lives of most people — especially the poor and people of color — less safe and more disordered. For example, poor people and people of color are often targeted by the cops based on the way they look. And even in instances where people call the cops to solve problems, the cops are often more disruptive than the original problem. We cannot build strong communities when people are constantly being taken out of them.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

We do not have all the answers. But, we do know that people in other parts of the world rely on prisons and police far less than the U.S. does, and suffer from far less harm. We also know that communities where people have housing, food, education and jobs have the lowest crime rates. The best way to reduce harm is by building safe, healthy communities where people have their basic needs met.

ABOLITION IS A REALISTIC VISION

The PIC did not always exist. The modern day prison is only about 200 years old. Even today there are places where people rely on each other instead of police, courts, and cages.

It has taken over 200 years to build up the PIC. We can't expect to take apart such a complicated system in a short time. The first slavery abolitionists began working decades before they won the abolition of slavery. Our struggle is a long one. Believing we can abolish the PIC is the first step.

PEOPLE
COMMON
OUR WORLD
HAVE A JOB
MORE IN

Mr. + the
Citizens
get a Law
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Cops!
Killers



**BLACK AND PINK
PRISON ABOLITION NOW!**

WHAT CAN I DO TODAY?

Today, there are small steps that will move us toward abolition, such as:

- Instead of supporting construction of a new prison to make the horrible conditions that most prisoners live in a little better, we can push for alternatives that reduce the number of people locked in cages.
- Instead of calling the police everytime there is a conflict in our neighborhoods, we can establish community forums and mediation practices to deal with harm and conflict.
- We can build safer and healthy communities by working to eliminate barriers to housing and jobs faced by people coming home from prison to help them stay out of the system.

**Trafficking Letters and Words:
Print Media and Prison Activism,
moving into the '20s**

By Stephen Wilson

Because America's prisons are its most opaque institutions, prisoners and their allies have always employed strategies of visibility to create awareness and understanding of who is being held captive and the conditions of their captivity. Print media—books, magazines, newsletters, newspapers, zines, pamphlets and visual art has been a critical part of those various strategies of visibility. Throughout the different eras of the American Prison Movement, but especially between the late 60's and early 80's, a number of platforms were created to connect prisoners to one another and their allies. Streams of prisoner-created content flowed from behind the walls and into the hands of allies who published and disseminated the materials. Across the prison movement, "prisoners used media to sustain connections with other prisoners and with sympathetic outsiders. As collective action became more difficult, writing and editing provided an opportunity to continue working collaboratively with others on both sides of the prison walls." (Berger and Losier, 134)

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How People on the Outside Can Support the Political Work of People on the Inside

By Stephen Wilson

Here are 18 things they can do for us:

1. Organize and struggle with us, but allow us to be the authorities on our own experiences
2. Don't speak for us. We can speak. When we cannot, due to repression or threats from prison officials, use your freedom and privilege to amplify our voices and advance our issues.
3. Be accomplices. Put yourselves out there for us. Attend rallies and speak out against the PIC. Organize call-ins to prisons. Show up at courthouses. Disrupt. Disrupt. Disrupt the PIC.
4. Whenever you organize, strategize or confer, make your spaces inclusive and accessible. Take note of who's missing. Find them, invite them and include them. If they don't come to you, go to them. Often, those who are missing are our families and our friends.
5. Remember, we don't have Internet access. The latest news is not just a click away for us. Create offline publications (newsletters, magazines, journals, letters) to keep us informed and educated. Provide platforms for our voices.
6. Employ an intersectional analysis. Identity does not equal experience. We are all prisoners, but we experience imprisonment differently. The experiences of an able-bodied, straight, cisgender male is very different from those of a trans/queer, disabled woman of color. Many of us struggle under multiple oppressive structures, but prevalent ideas of prison center upon able-bodied, straight, cisgender males. Broaden your understanding of

PROVIDE PLATFORMS FOR OUR VOICES
REMEMBER WE DON'T HAVE INTERNET
MAKE WRITTEN PUBLICATIONS
TO SHARE NEWS INSIDE

INCLUDE FAMILIES, FRIENDS
TRANSLATORS AND T
FORMERLY INCARC
INVITE WHO'S
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WAYS TO

BE ACCOMPLICES
SHOW UP OUTSIDE THE WALLS AND
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DISRUPT
DISRUPT THE PIC

TAKE CA

\$\$ SUPPORT ACTIVISTS BEHIND WALLS \$\$
NOTHING'S FREE INSIDE
LETTERS COST 3 HOURS'
WORK TO MAIL

PUT MONEY IN OUR
COMMISSARIES
AND ON OUR PHONES

FIGHT THE LAWS AND SYSTEMS THAT
PUT US HERE AND KEEP US HERE

ADVANCE ISSUES TO CREATE SAF
LESS CRIMINALIZED COMMUNITE

TAKEN FROM A TEXT BY *Critical Resistance*
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Oakland, CA 94612
Phone: 510.444.0484

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...ERATED
...S MISSING
...ACES ARE INCLUSIVE
...CARCERATED ORGANIZERS:

ORGANIZE AND STRUGGLE WITH US, BUT...

DON'T SPEAK FOR US

USE YOUR FREEDOM AND PRIVILEGE TO AMPLIFY
OUR VOICES AND ADVANCE OUR ISSUES

...RE OF YOURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

EMPLOY AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

ALL PRISONERS EXPERIENCE
IMPRISONMENT DIFFERENTLY

...THIS FIGHT IS LONG TERM

NOT ALL PRISONERS ARE
STRAIGHT
CISGENDERED,
ABLE-BODIED MALES

LEARN WHAT REALLY HAPPENS HERE
DON'T ASSUME
MAKE REAL CONNECTIONS
SOLICIT OUR VIEWS
AND EXPERIENCES

8. Learn what really happens in here. Don't assume. Oftentimes, reforms are pushed, and their ultimate results adversely affect prisoners. The PIC is adept at morphing demands for reform into measures that further oppress prisoners. Before and after campaigns and initiatives, solicit the views and experiences of prisoners.

9. Join us in advancing issues that truly create safe communities. For example: increased school funding, community mental health clinics, universal health insurance, living wages, community substance and alcohol treatment programs, transformative justice programs, decarceration and decriminalization efforts. This way, when we are released we'll have less chance of returning to prison.

10. Take care of yourselves. We need you. This fight is for the long term. We need you struggling alongside us and our families for the duration. Create and find joy in the struggle. Find time and space to rejuvenate and recalibrate. Be good to yourselves. Breathe.

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Print media kept prisoners attend to the social justice movements of the day and enabled them to be active participants. Allies created opportunities and platforms for prisoners to be heard. Prisoners' voices were given spaces to articulate their issues and solutions. Allies knew that "those closest to the problem are the ones closest to the solution." These arrangements kept prisoners and their allies informed about what was happening inside and outside the

prison walls. These connections, enabled by print media, were critical to successfully opposing the PIC. "The media and cultural production of people in prison- especially writing, but also song and visual art have been important vehicles for garnering national and international attention for local campaigns, and for coalescing local demands into broader social justice agendas." (5)

Print media, especially newsletters and newspapers, enabled prisoners to organize and educate. The San Quentin Rebellion of 1968 started after articles published in the prison newspaper *The Outlaw* circulated prisoners' grievances. *The Outlaw* was republished by *The Berkeley Barb*, an underground, radical newspaper. This led to more publicity and over 75% of the prisoners at San Quentin joining the work strike. The more recent successes of the California Hunger Strike demonstrate the importance of print media.



The First Step Act is not sentencing reform. It is, however, a giant leap in that direction. It earmarks \$250 million to be spent over the next five years on a number of initiatives, including a new ethics training program for judges.

Print media always played a major role in the American Prison Movement. Today, this is not the case. While there is more being written about prisons and prisoners today than at any other time in American history, prisoners are struggling to have their voices heard. So much of the discourse occurs online.

Many outside activists have not thought about how the move to online media affects inside activists. With so much of the focus of our activism being squarely placed on social media, how are the imprisoned to contribute? Prisoners don't have internet access so how will they join the conversation? This shift causes one to wonder what role prisoners play in the movement. Are prisoners' efforts central to their own

liberation? Are prisoners' opinions important or decisive? Do they play a role in creating strategy? Are they just symbolic actors?

Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* has done much of late to massify what was lost to some extent in the late 1960s to the early 1970s, there were any number of social events, KKK Membership, the Civil Rights Movement, and in the exhortations of

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There are real questions to be answered now that the role of print media has been diminished. How will prisoners connect to each other and outside activists? How can we expand a base that has no internet access? How has the internet affected our ability to organize behind the walls? How has the internet affected prisoners' political education and resistance abilities? Without access to the public via the internet, how will prisoners create visibility? Beyond a few creative writing contests, there aren't many opportunities to do so.

Even well-meaning activists and allies sometimes miss the point. Recently, I received two calls for submissions. Each one asked for essays centered on abolition or mass incarceration. Both notices welcomed contributions from the currently incarcerated. But both notices directed interested parties to a website for more information and submission guidelines. Neither notice included a street address for the editors or publishers. How is a prisoner going to contribute? It's frustrating being the topic of conversation, but never a participant.

At a time when mass incarceration and policing are being widely discussed, prisoners' voices need to be heard. The importance of print media cannot be overstated. We need platforms that enable us to connect with each other and outside activists. We need platforms where strategies and tactics can be shared. We need platforms where discussion and debate can happen. We need platforms where healing can occur. Prisoners depend upon allies to

create these platforms. As a movement, we need to grow our capacity to listen. We need to expand our ability to connect. We need to place more seats at the table.

This is not a call to abandon online forums or activism. It is a call for greater awareness and inclusivity. We need to be conscious of those not privileged with internet access. The next time you write or read interesting material online, ask yourself who is denied access to it. Then, do something to connect a prisoner to the material. Moreover, support the few print periodicals that keep prisoners connected and informed. Support publications like *Black & Pink*, *The Abolitionist*, *Turning The Tide*, *Hearts on a Wire*, *Stiletto*, *Ultraviolet*, *News & Letters*, *Prison Legal News*, and others. Print out an article and send it to a prisoner/activist. The voices of those centered at the most concentrated point of the PIC must be heard and amplified.

WORK CITED:

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IF YOU SILENT
ARE TRAPPED
THE WALL

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As 2018 winds down, I want to take the time to thank you for your support, efforts, and generosity. You have enabled me to learn and convey a great deal this year. You have helped me better organize behind the walls. When we needed help to fight PA DOC's onerous mail policy, you were there. I thank you. I am grateful to have you—a patient ear and wise tongue—in my life. Words cannot adequately convey my appreciation so I work everyday to become a better person and ally behind these walls. This is my gratitude in practice.

It is my hope that moving into the new year '19 our connection strengthens. I hope to contribute more to the struggle and deepen my understanding and practice. I hope that together we move another step closer to building a world that values all our lives, or at least abolishing the oppressive one that exists today.



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QUEERS HATE TECHIES

CITY OF CHICAGO

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