



# Turning danger upside down: The prison abolition movement in the US

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**ABSTRACT:** For decades, US governments have prioritised public security and although the prison population has begun to stabilise, the US maintains its distinction as the world leader in its use of incarceration. Crime, punishment and harsher sentences are high on the political agenda. The focus of this article however, is a movement that is challenging this view and that is gaining momentum across the US: the prison abolition movement. This movement has been studied by activists, activist scholars, criminologists, sociologists, and geographers among others, and contemporary incarceration has been analysed and theorised in a historical context of racism and slavery. Still, it is only more recently that anthropologists have shown an interest in the movement. This article aims to show, through an ethnographic example, how prison abolitionists not only in theory but concretely in practice, situate contemporary incarceration in the context of racism, slavery, and historical struggles. Drawing from discussions on meeting ethnography, revived anthropological social movement theories, and analysis by scholar-activists in the prison abolition movement, the article focuses on one specific conference in Montgomery, Alabama, in 2019.

**Keywords:** prison abolition, social movement, activism, meeting ethnography, feminism, racism

## Introduction

Crime and punishment are high on the political agenda around the world and politicians of all persuasions discuss harsher sentences for those labelled criminals. The focus of this article however, is a movement that is currently challenging and turning this view upside down and that is gaining momentum across the US: the prison abolition movement. To many people this is an unknown social movement which has grown tremendously in the US during recent years.

For decades, US governments have prioritised public security and although the prison population has begun to stabilise, the US maintains its distinction as the world leader in its use of incarceration. Between 1980 and 2015, the number of people incarcerated in the US increased from about 500,000 to over 2.2 million. African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at an average rate of 5.1 times that of white Americans, and in some states the rate is 10 times or more. The imprisonment rate for African American women is twice that of white women. Since 1970, the number of women in US jails has increased 14-fold, and the increase of women in US jails has far surpassed the growth of male prisoners (Swavola et al. 2016; Travis and Redburn 2014; Sentencing Project 2023, Shanahan and Kurti 2022: 70; Kurti and Brown 2023). Khan also notes that “women are the fastest-growing sector of the prison population” (Khan 2022: 50, 58).

In the US the ideas about prison abolition have gone from the margins toward the

mainstream and calls for abolition proliferate (Davis et al. 2022: xi). Abolition has come to be headlined in daily papers and Teen Vogue publishes articles with the tag “abolition”. There are discussions about the defunding of the police, and formerly incarcerated people open law offices (ibid.). Mariame Kaba, abolitionist, author, and organiser, well known among prison abolitionists, was on the New York Times Bestseller list in 2021 with her book *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Kaba 2021).

The prison abolition movement has been studied by activists, activist scholars, criminologists, sociologists, and geographers among others. Prison abolitionists have analysed and theorised contemporary incarceration from within the movement and situated contemporary incarceration in a historical context of racism and slavery. This seems to be one of the reasons for the growing achievements of the movement in the US (Gilmore 2022; Davis et al. 2022; Kaba 2021; Alexander 2020). Still, it is only more recently that anthropologists have started showing an interest in the movement (Khan 2022). This article aims to explore, through an ethnographic example, how prison abolitionists not only in theory but in practice, situate contemporary incarceration in the context of slavery and historical struggles. I have chosen to focus on one specific conference in Montgomery, Alabama, in 2019, which included a visit by participants to The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the related outdoor site National Memorial for Peace and Justice. I have further included one related and central autobiography, written by one of the conference participants. In the article, I will draw from revived anthropological social movement theories as well as analysis by scholar-activists in the prison abolition movement. Before I turn more directly to the meeting in Montgomery, I will briefly summarise some prior research on the prison abolition movement.

### Prison Abolition

The ‘carceral state’ tells us something about the society, and more generally, about norms for governance, according to Ortner (2016). Lancaster (2010: 63-76) talks about the rise of the punitive governance and titles one of his essays “Republic of Fear”. Other scholars have developed the concept of the “prison industrial complex” pointing out how the number of prisons has increased in an explosive way with mass incarceration, partly due to privatisation of prisons in the US since the 1980s (Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007, 2022; Alexander 2020; Harvey 2005; Sudbury 2013). Along the same lines, scholars have described police brutality and mass incarceration of the marginalised as neo-liberalisation in its roll-out phase, with new modes of governance, policies and programs that discipline, control, and criminalise marginalised social groups (Peck and Tickell 2002; Wacquant 2009). Foucault (1991) has been influential within many disciplines, anthropology included, not least in terms of understanding how individuals are formed by the prison system.

Berger and Losier have, as late as in 2018, commented that even though carceral institutions and the experience of imprisonment have long interested scholars “prison activism is an emerging topic of scholarly interest” (Berger and Losier 2018: 5).<sup>1</sup> In other words, this is still an understudied area, specifically when it comes to movement networks

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<sup>1</sup> Berger and Losier (2018) have given a review not only of the development of prisons in the US, but the historical development of activism and the prison abolition movement in the context of the US from 1865 to 1998.

among women within the movement (Berger and Losier 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Prison abolition differs substantially from prison reform, and this has been theoretically discussed at length (e.g. Ben-Moshe 2013; Gilmore 2022; Davis et al. 2022; Kaba 2021). Prison reforms involve work for reforms within prisons and within society's existing structure, while prison abolitionists critique racial capitalism and aim to change society structurally and radically.<sup>3</sup> Mass incarceration is to prison abolitionists a continuation of slavery, by which the state exercises violence to uphold a discriminatory, racist, and capitalist society. In the recent book *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, abolition feminism is developed and put in a context of urgency by the authors (Davis et al. 2022). The prison abolition movement encompasses diverse views, thoughts, and opinions. Abolition has been described as a critical contested space with common commitments, but internal tension about how to best dismantle carceral institutions and find alternative ways (Kurti and Brown 2023: 19; McLeod 2019).

The prison abolition movement encompasses women as well as men, but this article focuses on networks among women. The women active in the prison abolition networks were incarcerated during different historical and political US periods. Many were active in a time of the anti-colonial movements, the civil rights movement, and the Black Panthers and the Black Power movements in the 1960s and 1970s, when they largely saw themselves as part of a global political struggle (see also Collins 2006 and Spencer 2016). There are also white women in the broader networks, as well as in this conference, militant radicals who were active in networks, in support of the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s. They know each other since long back, share the common experience of being incarcerated, now stand released, and are active in the prison abolition movement.

Berger and Losier (2018) note how Critical Resistance<sup>4</sup> in the end of the 1990s became a clearing house for an abolitionism that re-emerged in the 21st century. They have pointed out how "abolitionism re-emerged through a host of social movements" and mention how the Global Justice Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement were the first ones to take up the issue, which later also became a topic in Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, in activism related to immigrants' rights, among antiracist, feminists, and LGBTQ activists (ibid.: 180).

Even though the prison abolition movement has existed since the 1990s in the US, with influential networks such as Critical Resistance and Incite,<sup>5</sup> many scholars have argued that it was the George Floyd rebellion in Minneapolis in May 2020, which in a few days

<sup>2</sup> For a short overview of anti-carceral feminism, see Berger and Losier (2018: 124-132). See also Emily Thuma (2019). Scholars, anthropologists included, have earlier shown the importance of more ethnographical methods when studying punishment and the prison system as a formative institution, in the context of an increasingly racialised system of incarceration (Rhodes 2001; Piché and Walby 2009; Fassin 2017).

<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to solve the tensions and conflict between revolutionaries and reformers during the New Left in the 1960s the Marxian Austrian French author André Gortz (1967) coined the concept of "non-reformist reforms", a concept taken up and also discussed in the context of prison abolition today (Ben-Moshe 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Critical Resistance is a network of prison abolitionists that has been influential, founded in California in 1997. Today the network has spread to Los Angeles, Oakland, Portland, and New York. Two of the initiators, Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, are still active in the movement, as scholar activists and authors. Gilmore's (2007) book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* and Davis' classic book *Are Prisons Obsolete* (2003) have become central to activists. More lately the book *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Davis et al. 2022) has received attention.

<sup>5</sup> For more about INCITE, see for example INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2016).

revived the movement and took it from the margins to the mainstream (Kaba 2020; Davis et al. 2022; Khan 2022). There was a collective expression of discontent and anger with state violence and against racial inequalities, and “abolitionists offered space for a critique that could normatively upend the criminal legal system’s claim to public safety” (Kurti and Brown 2023: 2).

Today the US prison abolition movement has spread through many new and diverse local, regional, and national networks also with a new generation of young activist leaders. These women from the younger generation were incarcerated and released in a more recent context, during a time of new anti-terrorism and anti-migration laws, with hip-hop, the Occupy movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement, as political forms of expression. They have grown up with social media, and communicate and practice activism through new media channels (Yang 2016, see also Lebron 2017).

### **Anthropology and the prison abolition movement**

In a recent review of works in the anthropology of mass incarceration, Aisha Khan has noted that “anthropology of carcerality is not a cohesive field of inquiry, largely because anthropology is still building its research agendas” (Khan 2022: 52).<sup>6</sup> She deplores that “anthropological research on carcerality remains outpaced by other disciplines, particularly sociology, criminology and geography” (ibid.: 51) and notes that this is also commented on by many others, such as for example, Rhodes (2001), Gusterson (2007), and Fassin (2017). Khan (2022) has further demonstrated how anthropology could contribute to these studies and argues that anthropology’s interest in kinship could be a productive approach to understand carcerality in the US. In this article, I similarly explore how anthropology’s revived theoretical and methodological interest in social movements could be combined with the analysis by activist scholars, involved in the prison abolition movement in the US.

Since the end of the 1990s anthropological studies on social movements and activism have been grounded in ethnographic fieldwork and revived network theories. Anthropologists have contributed with ethnographic studies to the re-emergent field of social movement research (Alvarez, Dagnini and Escobar 1998; Escobar 2020; Juris 2008, 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012; Bodirsky 2022) and ethnographically as well as theoretically, combined descriptions and analysis of the dark side of the world with alternative visions of the future (Ortner 2016). To participate in meetings is a central part of social movement activities. Meetings will help us to understand something about, for example, social movements, but they have still not been given their due attention among anthropologists, and meeting ethnography should be put more in focus (Sandler and Thedvall 2017: 2).<sup>7</sup>

Meetings have so far played a central role in my project and this article focuses, as said, on one specific conference. I had earlier met many of the people among the conference participants in Montgomery in other meetings.<sup>8</sup> Kendall and Silver (2017: 42) have

<sup>6</sup> The review has its focus on studies outside the actual physical sites of imprisonment and is thus relevant in this context.

<sup>7</sup> Meetings are central to social movement and in earlier projects on activism, I have spent a large part of my time in meetings; in Buddha viharas in Birmingham and Wolverhampton in Great Britain, in Indian villages in Uttar Pradesh and in political offices (Hardtmann 2007), and also in the “meeting of meetings” the World Social Forums; in Mumbai in India, in Belém in Brazil and in Nairobi in Kenya (Hardtmann 2017).

<sup>8</sup> The project has run on a slow pace since it started in 2017, due to other commitments.

commented that meetings do not make sense in themselves, but it requires that we bring meeting observations into dialogue with other methods such as, for example, interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Anthropologists have also shown how meetings in social movements must be understood in a broader context (e.g. Alvarez et al. 1998; Graeber 2009; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Escobar 2020). A meeting ethnography methodology requires that we combine “institutional and global ethnographic methods that situate and connect the meeting to macro-political economic and social environments in which the meeting comes to make sense” (Kendall and Silver 2017: 42).

The classic article by Marcus (1995) about following the field, three decades later, still remains an inspiration to many anthropologists in multi-sited fieldworks, not least when it comes to social movements. Scholars today have a better understanding of how ethnographic material from multi-sited fieldwork could be theoretically framed (Hannerz 2003; Osterweil 2004; Graeber 2009; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Ortner 2016; Falzon 2016; Escobar 2020). My interest in the US prison abolition movement has grown in tandem with my ongoing project on prison abolition activism in Sweden and the Nordic countries in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>9</sup> The meeting ethnography in this article is not an isolated occasion in the movement, and similarly not in my own project. It is part of a broader context in which I have used various methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, visits to offices, archive studies, reading of autobiographies, collecting material, objects and much more, in what was phrased by Gusterson (1997) as polymorphous engagement, self-evident among anthropologists today, not least in geographically spread-out fields such as social movements.<sup>10</sup> Let me now turn more directly to the Montgomery conference.

### **The conference in Montgomery, Alabama**

It was not by chance that the conference took place in Montgomery, but the location for the conference in October 2019 was chosen carefully, for the fact of it being loaded with symbolism. Montgomery is the city in Alabama well known for the bus boycott in 1955, when Rosa Parks turned against racism and segregation, refusing to give up her seat to a white person, becoming a symbol for the civil rights movement, along with Martin Luther King. In March 2019, more than six decades after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 700 people, formerly incarcerated women activists, with families, friends, and allies mainly from all over the country but also abroad, representing about 200 organisations, arrived at this three-day conference in one of the hotels in the city.

During the three-day conference there were key speeches in the enormous main hall,

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<sup>9</sup> The activists in Sweden were pioneering at the time and successful in many ways, with a large public support, but the movement faded away in the 1980s, and prison abolition is today an unthinkable stance in Sweden. The ethnography in this essay is thus part of an ongoing broader research project about prison abolitionism in Sweden (and Norway) in the 1960s and 1970s. For more about the Nordic prison abolition movement, see for example Adamson et al. (2004), Mathiesen (1974, 2004, 2015 [1974]), Tham (2004, 2022), Edling (2004). There are many similarities with the contemporary prison abolitionist activism in the US. Still, the activism takes place in different historical time periods, different geographical areas, the activists refer to very different histories, and belong to different political, socio-economic and cultural contexts.

<sup>10</sup> In the last few decades of anthropology, we have seen intense discussions on the relation between scholars, activists, and activist scholars, and further on the need to decolonise anthropology, related to epistemological and ontological questions (see, for example, Harrison 2010, 2018; McGranahan and Rizvi 2016; Kuokkanen 2008; Smith 2012; Casas-Cortés et al. 2008; Khan 2022). I have had all reasons to reflect on my own role in the field.

organised with 70 round-tables hosting ten people each. This was where we ate our buffet breakfasts and lunches when the main panels were being presented on the stage. Some of the speeches from the main stage drew much applause and at times people in the large hall stood up applauding, shouting appreciation, documenting speeches with cell phones. The format with buffets and the many round-tables made it possible to meet and connect with new people in small groups and there were many visiting cards changing hands. I had met many of the activists who came for the Montgomery conference before. The networks overlap; this actually meant that many participants knew each other from before, even though this conference was also an opportunity for people to get to know new people.

There were time slots with a large number of parallel break-out sessions or workshops to choose between. There were more than 40 panels all together. Each day there were also a number of sessions, which took up general topics such as “Women and the Prison Industrial Complex”, or “Care not Cages, Women First”, but also more specific issues, with titles such as, “Clemency – Am I ready to Apply?”, discussing more in detail how to prepare for clemency. A central recurring theme during the conference was the mother-child relation and in a number of panels the family was in focus, such as “Family Reunification, Equity and Empowerment”. Others were directed to specific age groups, such as “Releasing Aging People in Prison” or “Still We Rise: Building Sisterhood and Youth Power”. In the evenings there were dance performances, poetry readings, and art displays to join.

The activists organise in networks with discriminated and formerly incarcerated people in other parts of the world (Coyle and Scott 2021; see also Davis et al. 2022: 49f). One of the morning plenaries was titled “Reimagining Communities Around the World: Connecting with Our Sisters Overseas”. The plenary was an opportunity for international participants to introduce themselves and the work they carried out outside of the US. The panel included speeches by the main organisers of the conference, and also speeches by women from Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. According to the organisers the aim of this plenary was to “build bridges of solidarity and activism with sisters across borders”.

Over the last decades we have seen new and radical directions in the anthropology of resistance and activism which have shed light on how challenges to the existing order can be constructed (Ortner 2016). In movements, such as Occupy and the Global Justice Movement, the activists organised and reorganised flexibly and the network constellations changed according to situational demands, similar to what was discussed in a classic article by Gerlach and Hine already in 1970 (Gerlach and Hine 1970), and recognised by many scholars (Eschle and Maignashca 2010; Juris 2008; Razsa and Kurnik 2012; Routledge et al. 2006; Hardtmann 2017). The increased use of social media has also changed the forms of the movement networks (Juris 2008, 2012).<sup>11</sup> The activists and activists-scholars in the prison abolition movement seem to similarly reorganize according to the context and situation.<sup>12</sup> They are however not only in the process of creating national and transnational networks in a contemporary context, but are also trying to relate to and analyse historical connections, which I will now address more directly here on.

<sup>11</sup> Digital activism is still a broad field without much of coherent mode of inquiry (Kaun and Uldam 2018). For a useful review of anthropological and ethnographic research on social movements and visual media, see N. Bajoghli (2023).

<sup>12</sup> For discussion about the relation between activists, scholars and activist scholars, see for example Holmes and Marcus (2008), Juris (2008), Kunnath (2013), Hardtmann et al. (2016), Bodirsky (2022).

### The Legacy Museum and The National Memorial

One of the main reasons for holding the national conference specifically in the city of Montgomery was The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, which had just been newly opened in 2018, one year before this conference was conducted. The museum displays the historical connection between slavery and the contemporary prison system, similar to what is discussed within the movement. In this sense, the museum is a materialisation of the ideas already present in theoretical frameworks developed by activists-scholars (see, e.g. Gilmore 2022). According to the organisers of the conference, one particular and explicit idea was also to put the participants' own individual experiences in the context of contemporary mass incarceration, and also in the broader historical context of structural racism and slavery.

The Legacy Museum is connected to the outdoor site of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and they were both built by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) (<https://eji.org/about/>), an NGO started in 1989.<sup>13</sup> At the very beginning of the conference, many participants visited the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial, and in between panels and workshops during the three-day conference, participants went in their own small groups to tour and experience these. The museum is built on a site in Montgomery where enslaved Black people were imprisoned before auction, and just some blocks away from one of the former largest slavery auction sites in the US. When you enter the museum, it is through a completely dark hallway. The sounds that surround you will place you in the warehouse that once existed on this geographical site. You are immediately taken back in time in an obvious sense. Coming out of the hallway you enter a photo exhibition, and you are taken through history, from the time of slavery up to present time with mass incarceration. Contemporary structural racism and the present prison system are related to and presented in the context of slavery in great historical detail. This is a room where many participants from the conference spent hours on end; many people also went back to the museum to go through the experience once again.

The museum exhibits the connection between slavery and the contemporary prison system by different means. This relation may not be obvious when you enter the museum, but the detailed history is presented in many diverse forms and with new technology and involving all senses. Slavery in the 18th and 19th century and its abolishment in the mid-19th century are described in detail. Next, we get a detailed history of the terror lynchings that followed after the abolishment of slavery, as a new tool of racial control.<sup>14</sup> The exhibition shows that when public lynching was seen as inhuman and was abandoned for moral reasons, the lynching then moved indoors, and now took the form of execution and death sentences in the prisons.

In the museum you get to know the history of slavery, illustrated by personal life

<sup>13</sup> EJI describe in the homepage how they provide legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in state jails and prisons. They organise workshops, spread information, and represent people who have wrongly been sentenced to the death penalty in the US. Since 1989 they have been able to free 130 people, who would have been executed in prison. <https://eji.org/racial-justice/> .

<sup>14</sup> EJI has documented racial terror lynchings and according to the EJI homepage: "EJI has documented 4,084 racial terror lynchings in 12 Southern states between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and 1950, which is at least 800 more lynchings in these states than previously reported. EJI has also documented more than 300 racial terror lynchings in other states during this time period." <https://eji.org/racial-justice/> .

stories. The history runs up to contemporary times, and into the present. Entering one of the rooms, you find four telephone booths at the centre, which give the image of a contemporary visitors' room in prison. When you pick up one of the phone receivers you will be placed face to face with an incarcerated person on the other side of the glass window, through new technology. The technology makes the image hyperreal, and you get to listen to a personal life story, told in three minutes, now contextualised within the broader historical framework of slavery, mass incarceration, and contemporary structural racism.

After a visit to the museum, where hours were spent by many in small groups, there was a short walk or a few minutes ride in a shuttle bus to The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. This is a six-acre outdoor site which is connected to the museum, as said. It is described on the homepage as a "sacred space for truth-telling and reflection about racial terror in America and its legacy" and here the artistic expressions are central (<https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/>).

For one to walk through the site of the National Memorial, is to walk through history. As you enter, you are among sculptures on slavery. Centrally placed on a small hill are more than 800 hanging Corten steel monuments:

The memorial structure on the center of the site is constructed of over 800 corten steel monuments, one for each county in the United States where a racial terror lynching took place. The names of the lynching victims are engraved on the columns. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>

The National Memorial Park, akin to the Museum, takes the visitors from slavery, through the civil rights movement with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, to contemporary times with racially biased criminal justice and police violence, as described on EJI's homepage:

EJI then leads visitors on a journey from slavery, through lynching and racial terror, with text, narrative, and monuments to the lynching victims in America. In the center of the site, visitors will encounter a memorial square, built in collaboration with MASS Design Group. The memorial experience continues through the civil rights era made visible with a sculpture by Dana King dedicated to the women who sustained the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Finally, the memorial journey ends with contemporary issues of police violence and racially biased criminal justice expressed in a final work created by Hank Willis Thomas. The memorial displays writing from Toni Morrison and Elizabeth Alexander, words from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and a reflection space in honor of Ida B. Wells. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>

With the help of sculptures, explanatory texts, and writings by well-known authors, we are again made to understand how contemporary racism, including a biased criminal justice system, is not only related to a violent and racist history, but are also reminded of how contemporary activists belong in a long tradition of collective struggle against racism.

In the National Memorial too, the conference participants walked together in couples or small groups. The Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice point out how the myth of racial inferiority has not been eradicated, but instead cuts across

generations, and is now seen in the contemporary criminal justice system. This was taken up again in speeches, panels, and sessions during the conference. The trips to the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial recurrently came up during panels and workshops, as also during lunches and at the end of the day. This emotional side of the conference made it differ drastically from most other conferences. The conference was set in the midst of history. It was carefully planned to take place more specifically in the contexts of first, the legacy of slavery; and second, the historical struggle against racism.

In this conference and through meeting ethnography, we find processes of communicative interaction among participants, cognitive practices, as it was described rather early, by Eyerman and Jamison (1991: 48). What is expressed and significant in the prison abolition movement and in the Montgomery conference is a socially constructive force, social action, from where new knowledge originates, and new perspectives on contemporary incarceration as related to slavery, are developed. In the formative processes of creating new knowledge and networks, autobiographies have an important role to play, which I will now explore.

### Autobiographies

Life stories have a large part to play in the movement, not only in the Legacy Museum, but also in the form of autobiographies. Some women at the conference have written their autobiographies, and one central book is written by Susan Burton (2017), one of the conference participants. Burton's book was the first one to be put into my hand and just when I got in contact with the movement, and it was with her colleagues and others I walked through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The writings by activist practitioners and political intellectuals in the movement are of main importance to understand the history of the movement as well as the contemporary processes when the prison abolitionists are now increasingly finding common ground with various nationwide and global movement networks.

Angela Y. Davis (2017 [1974]) describes her well-known autobiography from 1974 as a *political* autobiography, in which the collective struggle is put forward rather than the personal stories (ibid: xvi, italics in origin).<sup>15</sup> The collective struggle is emphasised in the autobiographies, but also in panels and sessions during many contemporary prison abolition conferences. The autobiographies of Davis (2017 [1974]), Shakur (1987) and Brown (1992), three of the activists of the Black Power movement in the 1960s have been compared and discussed in detail by Margo Perkins (2000), and notably, she wrote two decades back:

The works by Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown are, to date [in 2000], the only book-length autobiographies published by women on the front lines of the Black Power Movement. (Perkins 2000: xiv).

Much has happened in the last two decades with the revived Black Lives Matter, and the flourishing prison abolition movement in the US. There are now a number of autobiographies by lesser-known women, such as Susan Burton, who are still central and well-known within

<sup>15</sup> See also a more recent interview with Davis (2020) at <https://platypus1917.org/2021/07/03/bridging-theory-and-practice-an-interview-with-angela-davis/>

the movement, taking inspiration from earlier activists, situating themselves politically in a broader contemporary and historic struggle. Burton is well known among prison abolitionists by her book *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women* (Burton and Lynn 2017), which was distributed for free to women in prisons after it was published in 2017. After her release she opened a re-entry house for other women, just released from prison. She was one of the women in the conference in Montgomery, and her organisation was in charge of one of the well-attended break-out sessions at the conference.

In the book, Burton elaborates her own background, and her individual life story of economic poverty, violence, and assaults are portrayed at length. When she lost her five-year-old son in a car accident she became addicted to crack heroine. Burton describes danger, violence, and self-defence, in relation to the individual violent men in her life, discusses structural and gendered violence, and calls upon women to organise and enter into activism. For 15 years she spent periods in prison, until she got into a rehabilitation centre. Burton situates herself in a broader context as well, and relates her own life to the prison-industrial complex, but also to the Black Lives Matter movement, and the struggle of others (Burton and Lynn 2017: 249).

At the end of the book, she puts her own life in the light of history and situates her experiences in the context of the well-known Selma to Montgomery March in 1965. She begins the chapter titled *The Movement* in the following way:

Fifty years ago, they were six hundred brave and strong. On March 8, 2015, I stood, above the Alabama River, feet planted on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, named for the Confederate general and grand dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. I could almost taste the blood spilled on that Sunday, March 7, 1965. Blood of the peaceful protestors on the “Walk for Freedom” from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery. (Burton and Lynn 2017: 273)

Similar to the presentations in the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial, Burton situates contemporary incarceration in a historical context and connects her own life in a very physical and embodied way to earlier struggles:

Here in Dallas County, now 80 percent black and the poorest county in Alabama, with nearly a third of the population living below poverty line, I stood on the bridge [...] with the Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted People’s Movement. We’d lost gains of the civil rights movement on the back of the criminal justice system. [...] We held a sign that said, “FROM THE BACK OF THE BUS TO THE FRONT OF THE PRISON” (Burton and Lynn 2017: 274f, capital letters in original)

The foreword to the book is written by the author Michelle Alexander, well-known among prison abolitionists for her book *The New Jim Crow* (2020). On the very first page itself, Alexander depicts a woman who opens up doors, holds hands with mothers, offers food and shelter, organises others, becomes an inspiration, and is a proud abolitionist and freedom fighter. Alexander writes: “Some people know this woman by the name Harriet Tubman. I know her as Susan” (Alexander 2017: ix). “Abolitionist” is used in two different contexts, not

only by Alexander, but more generally in the movement. Alexander connects Susan Burton and contemporary prison abolitionists directly to Harriet Tubman and abolitionists in the time of slavery. By way of her writing, she makes us realise immediately the historical link between contemporary struggle against racism among prison abolitionists, and the struggle against slavery.

Even though Burton presents her very personal life story, her writings could be seen as a political autobiography, in which the importance of collective struggle is emphasised. Political autobiographies have come to play a central role in the US prison abolition movement, and have become important extensions of the political work, as also for practicing transformative justice action (Kaba 2021; Davis et al. 2022; see also Perkins 2000: 149 and Polletta 2006).

### Concluding comment

During the Montgomery conference, as also in the Legacy Museum, or in The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, or for that matter in the autobiography discussed, contemporary incarceration is historically related to slavery, and the activists connect their own life stories to this history. As said, two parallel histories are presented: first, the history of discrimination and racism; and second, the collective and organised struggle against it.

The activists in Montgomery establish themselves as historically connected, but also as transnationally allied with others across geographical distances. (Coyle and Scott (eds.) 2021; see also Davis et al. 2022). The breakfast plenary was an explicit attempt to connect to others and titled, *Reimagining Communities Around the World: Connecting with Our Sisters Overseas*. This is just one example among many others. However, in the transnational context – rather than emphasising the history of slavery – the activists highlight their common situation with others; being discriminated against on diverse grounds, being part of a common and global struggle against discrimination, and a global capitalist system, closely related to the prison system (Sudbury 2013; Davis et al. 2022; Gilmore 2007). In this context, prison abolition is often combined with, and overlaps with, feminist networks (Davis et al. 2022).

With ethnographic studies, anthropologists have contributed to the re-emergent field of social movement research, and combined analysis of the dark side of the world with alternative visions of the future, as noted by Ortner (2016). Interestingly, prison abolitionists are closely related to anthropologists, when it comes to exposing the dark side of history, analysing the danger of contemporary racialised state violence and imprisonment, still demonstrating the urgency of an alternative future, and new ways of linking theory with practice. In some often-quoted sentences, Gilmore has given an answer to those who criticise abolitionism for being negative, and about breaking it all down:

What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. So those who feel in the gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can. (Gilmore 2019).

In *Networking Futures*, Juris (2008) discusses in a similar vein, micro-political practices, and looks at self-organisation as “part of a wider *network ideal*, which inspires concrete *networking practices* within specific social, cultural and political contexts” (ibid:16, italics mine). Networks in social movements are not just an organisational form, but the processes

of creating networks could also be seen as an important part of a vision (Juris 2008). By connecting to a genealogy of women activists in history, as well as to transnational prison abolitionist and women's networks across geographical distances, the activists in Montgomery contribute to a broader vision of emancipation. (see, e.g. Burton and Lynn 2017; James 2013; Kaba 2021; Davis et al. 2022; Gilmore 2007). With ethnography from the Montgomery conference, I hope to have given glimpses of what it may look like, not only in theory but more concretely in practice, when prison abolitionists come together to create and recreate networks, knowledge, and visions of a society without fear and danger.

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