



Mutual aid as abolitionist praxis

Simone Weil Davis & Rachel Fayter

To cite this article: Simone Weil Davis & Rachel Fayter (2020): Mutual aid as abolitionist praxis, Citizenship Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13621025.2020.1859190](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2020.1859190)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2020.1859190>



Published online: 11 Dec 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 28



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Mutual aid as abolitionist praxis

Simone Weil Davis^a and Rachel Fayer^b

^aEthics, Society & Law Program, Trinity College, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada; ^bDepartment of Criminology, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

Prisons, jails, and detention facilities, by definition, are designed to isolate and separate people from their communities. To challenge and upend carcerality requires not just dismantlement, but radical revisioning, a *building* – of flourishing, free and caring communities. Collectively developed responses and resources for people and ecosystems, led by those with lived experience of oppression, are the foundation for a world without prisons.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 December 2019
Accepted 21 July 2020

KEYWORDS

Carcerality; mutual aid;
abolition; praxis

Prisons, jails, and detention facilities, by definition, are designed to isolate and separate people from their communities. With increasing rates of incarceration and migrant detention, especially among women and racialized communities (Roberts 2017; United Nations (UN) General Assembly 2010; Zinger 2019), large numbers of people are being torn from their families, forced to leave their life and everything they know behind. People in prison or on parole, the undocumented, and those in immigrant detention share experiences of dislocation, disenfranchisement, racism, violence and dehumanization. Often, they are confined in the same facility. In this bluntest of ways, the ‘problems’ of prison and of immigrant detention converge.

But it may be prison abolitionist ‘solutions’ that matter most in this convergence. To challenge and upend carcerality requires not just dismantlement, but radical revisioning, a *building* – of flourishing, free and caring communities (Davis 2003). Collectively developed responses and resources for people and ecosystems, led by those with lived experience of oppression, are the foundation for a world without prisons.

Mutual aid makes it possible both to survive the present – solidarity as resistance – and to imagine and build ‘decarceral futures’ (Aiken and Silverman 2019; Spade 2020; Kaba and Spade 2020). Particularly when seeking help from state and official sources is a dead end and an active harm, people organize to help each other. Perhaps there is no refugee camp, no migrant community, no institution of confinement, no group of survivors, no low-income neighborhood where people of color live, where that isn’t the case.

In prisons and migrant detention facilities, mutual aid is a way of life and survival. Extensive research has shown that mutual aid or peer-support is very beneficial for criminalized people (Maruna and LeBel 2003; Pollack 2008; Sheehan, McIvor, and Trotter 2011), yet the oppressive carceral system typically does not support it. In carceral settings, relationships are highly structured and controlled (Pollack 2007), while

solidarity and even friendship among prisoners is repressed (Anonymous Prisoner 4 2017; Fayter and Payne 2017; Law 2012; McCorkel 2003). Despite this, many people with lived experience of incarceration advocate for and support other prisoners and criminalized people, organizing resistance to the carceral state. Abolitionist praxis requires a politics built around this type of solidarity in action.

As a former prisoner who spent almost four years in prison, I (co-author Rachel Fayter) can personally attest to the importance of mutual aid. When I first arrived at a new institution, I relied on those who were there before me to learn the rules and how to navigate the system. I also quickly learned that fighting for my rights would result in being targeted by staff. In federal custody there were technically several prisoner employment positions focused on mutual-aid, such as inmate committee, grievance coordinator, and peer-support. These jobs were considered ‘positions of trust’ within the institution, which effectively meant that anyone who had a misconduct was not allowed to work. Some of these positions remained unfilled for years at a time, but informal mutual aid is persistent; when the sanctioned opportunities were not available prisoner support moved underground.

Engaging in ‘everyday acts of resistance’ (Scott 1985, 1990) prisoners often made care packages for new arrivals, with hygiene products, coffee, and stamps. We cooked for one another, lent clothing to someone who had a visit, and shared a book or music album. These acts of kindness were prohibited by the system and anyone who participated risked misconduct charges, which reduces one’s chance for parole. Despite the risk, we strive to live in solidarity.

Resistance and solidarity coincide in mutual aid (Medina 2013). This convergence drove our own opening workshop at the 2019 *Decarceral Futures* conference. Walls to Bridges courses bring together incarcerated and non-incarcerated students as classmates (wallstobridges.ca). W2B learning circles are founded on the idea that we need each other’s shared knowledges *and* our incommensurabilities (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). Examining the hierarchical and oppressive power relations that structure institutions of punishment as well as education, students forge, test, challenge and strengthen other ways of relating. To teach, learn and unlearn together: education as mutual aid.

Since the militarization of the US-Mexico border, Covid and the 2020 uprising against anti-Black racism, both existing and emergent networks of mutual aid are becoming more intentional, being coordinated into larger networks of care, refined and guided by those from marginalized communities.

‘Caremongering’ is a human trait; it is also an abolitionist building block (Chopra 2020). It is a collective deepening of webs of relationship that are neither defined nor ‘managed’ by carceral or capitalist structures. Perhaps these long-established relational structures, coordinated networks of collective care, provide the grounds for an alternative conceptualization of ‘citizenship’ (Abu El-Haj 2009), one based not on papers or the nation-state, but on situated engagement in mutual aid.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Simone Weil Davis is Associate Director of Ethics, Society & Law at Trinity College, the University of Toronto. Publications include *Turning Teaching Inside Out: A Pedagogy of Transformation for Community-Based Learning* (2013), co-edited with B.S. Roswell. Simone was cofounder and first coordinator of Canada's Walls to Bridges program and is a member of the Walls to Bridges Collective. Her current research considers emotions and embodied experience in learning spaces in and beyond the academy, as a confrontation with racism and the possibilities of anti-racism in education.

Rachel Fayter is a Ph.D student in the Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa. She completed her B.A. and MA degrees in community psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University. While incarcerated at Grand Valley Institution for Women, Rachel engaged in the Walls to Bridges (W2B) prison education program and has been active in the alumni collective since 2014. Since her return to the community, Rachel has been advocating for prisoner rights and social justice-oriented policy changes, through publications, panel discussions, public education, and media interviews. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and *Canadian Psychology*. Rachel's Ph.D research focuses on the strengths and resiliency of criminalized women despite histories of trauma and imprisonment, and documenting how prison policies and practices actively inhibit solidarity and asset-based coping among women.

References

- Abu El-Haj, T. R. A. 2009. "Becoming Citizens in an Era of Globalization and Transnational Migration: Re-imagining Citizenship as Critical Practice." *Theory into Practice* 48 (4): 274–282. doi:10.1080/00405840903192714.
- Aiken, S., and S. J. Silverman. 2019. "Introduction to DeCarceral Futures." *DeCarceral Futures Conference Presentation*. Kingston, Ontario: Queens University Faculty of Law.
- Anonymous Prisoner 4. 2017. "Dispatches from Federally Sentenced Women: Fraser Valley Institution." *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 26 (1&2): 49–54.
- Chopra, G. 2020. "'Read First' Post." *Caremongering-TO*. www.facebook.com/groups/TO.Community.Response.COVID19/permalink/2661130287455762/
- Davis, A. Y. 2003. "Abolitionist Alternatives." In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, edited by Greg Ruggiero, 105–115. NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Fayter, R., and S. Payne. 2017. "The Impact of the Conservative Punishment Agenda on Federally Sentenced Women and Priorities for Social Change." *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 26 (1&2): 10–30.
- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. 2012. "Decolonization and the Pedagogy of Solidarity." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1 (1): 41–67.
- Kaba, M., and D. Spade. 2020. "Interviewees: 'Solidarity Not Charity': Mutual Aid and How to Organize in the Age of Coronavirus," *Democracy Now!* Accessed 21 March 2020. www.democracynow.org/2020/3/20/coronavirus_community_response_mutual_aid
- Law, V. 2012. *Resistance behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*. 2nd ed. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Maruna, S., and T. LeBel. 2003. "Welcome Home? Examining the 'Re-entry Court' Concept from a Strengths-based Perspective." *Western Criminology Review* 4: 91–107.
- McCorkel, J. A. 2003. "Embodied Surveillance and the Gendering of Punishment." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32 (1): 41–76. doi:10.1177/0891241602238938.
- Medina, J. 2013. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pollack, S. 2007. "'I'm Just Not Good in Relationships': Victimization Discourses and the Gendered Regulation of Criminalized Women." *Feminist Criminology* 2: 158–174. doi:10.1177/1557085106297521.

- Pollack, S. 2008. *Locked In, Locked Out: Imprisoning Women in the Shrinking and Punitive Welfare State*. Ottawa, ON: Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University. Accessed 15 June 2020. https://www.academia.edu/6375218/Locked_In_Locked_Out_Imprisoning_Women_in_the_Shrinking_and_Punitive_Welfare_State
- Roberts, A. 2017. *Gendered States of Punishment and Welfare: Feminist Political Economy, Primitive Accumulation and the Law*. New York: Routledge.
- Scott, J. C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J. C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sheehan, R., G. McIvor, and C. Trotter. 2011. "Who Cares? Fostering Networks and Relationships in Prison and Beyond." In *Working with Women Offenders in the Community*, edited by Sheehan, R., G. McIvor, and C. Trotter, 268–287. . Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Spade, D. 2020. "The Big Door Brigade." *website*. Accessed 6 June 2020. www.bigdoorbrigade.com
- United Nations (UN) General Assembly. 2010. *The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (The Bangkok Rules)*. Accessed 21 February 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/docs/2010/res%202010-16.pdf>
- Zinger, I. 2019. *Annual Report from the Office of the Correctional Investigator: 2018-2019*. Ottawa: Correctional Investigator of Canada.