

Angela davis are prisons obsolete chapter 2 summary

Why should we get rid of prisons? Nobody said it better than Angela Y. Davis in her amazing little book Are Prisons Obsolete? (Seven Stories Press, 2005). In a mere 115 pages Davis can take you from completely uninformed to possessing a pretty sophisticated degree of understanding. She is so cool. But if you don't feel like reading 115 pages today, or if you're confined to your home due to mobility issues, or if your library doesn't have a copy, or if for any other reason you are not currently able to read her absolutely brilliant text, I've compiled a little "greatest hits" list: four of my favorite quotes from the book, in order of appearance. 1. Prison abolitionists are dismissed as utopians and idealists whose ideas are at best unrealistic and impracticable, and, at worst, mystifying and foolish. This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families. The prison is considered so "natural" that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it. (pages 9-10) Why this is excellent: We can't do anything about prisons until we are willing to at least momentarily suspend the assumption that we absolutely need to have them. There's a lot of other crap that goes along with prison abolition, but none of it matters unless we're willing to say "OK, so what if we could get rid of prisons?" Thank you, that's a start. 2. The prison ... functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers ... It relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism. (page 16) Why this is important: Like any good twelve step program, we can't get anywhere until we have a problem. The prison system is a problem, but that is conveniently overlooked most of the time. Instead, we like to pretend it's a solution. Thus not only does the system trick us into ignoring how much of a problem prisons are, it also helps us forget about how much we should be doing about other issues, like poverty and racism. Got a social problem? Call it a legal problem, lock some folks up, and you don't have to think about it anymore. Remember how the Jim Crow laws of the postbellum South eased the social and economic transition away from slavery for white folks who wanted to hold onto white supremacy and an incredibly affordable labor pool? How about that time that the "War on Drugs"? 3. Positing decarceration as our overarching strategy, we [should] try to envision a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment-demilitarization of schools, revitalization and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance. (page 107) Why I'm into this: We can't think about how to deal with the prison system unless we recognize that what we're dealing with is way bigger than that. This is not a prison problem, this is an everything problem, this is an everything problem around. Heterosexism, sexism, racism, classism, American exceptionalism: I could go on all day. In the same way that you can't go about addressing sexism without addressing sexism without fixing a bunch of other shit, too. 4. The alternatives toward which I have gestured ... which can also include ind indirectly with the existing system of criminal justice. But, however mediated their relation might be to the current system of jails and prisons, these alternatives are attempting to reverse of a criminal justice. the impact of the prison industrial complex on our world. (page 111) Why this one, too: OK, so this may sound a little bit like number three, and God knows there's something special about this one. The crucial point here is that everything that we do from a reduction in sentencing to the establishment of a great transitional housing facility to family sentencing circles for youth, must be focused on "[reversing] the impact of the prison industrial complex on our world." It's not good enough to do something better than what already exists because reforms function - intentionally or not - to entrench the prison system in our world. It sounds a little like I'm saying let people rot in horrible conditions, because the worse prisons are now the more likely it is that we'll get rid of them in the future. That's not completely true, but it's not completely true, but it's not completely false either. Chapter 2: Slavery, Civil Rights, and Abolitionist Perspectives Toward Prison I originally made this audiobook for a reading group we did a while back, but seeing as how there is no other audiobook of this classic abolitionist Angela Davis text from 2004, I'm spreading it around for folks to learn from! . Podcast: Play in new window DownloadSubscribe: RSS Do we need prisons? This week, Kim Wilson and Brian pick out some of their favorite and for anyone who wants to better understand the prison industrial complex. Kim and Brian pick out some of their favorite sections, digging deeper into topics like the inevitability of prisons and the religious foundations of incarcerated women, and how prisons touch all of our lives even if we've never been incarcerated. Read "Are Prisons Obsolete?" by Angela Davis Support our show and join us on Patreon. Please listen, subscribe, and rate/review our podcast on iTunes. Send us tips, comments, and questions: beyondprisonspodcast@gmail.com Follow us on Twitter: @Beyond_Prison @phillyprof03 @bsonenstein Music & Production: Jared Ware Transcript Brian Sonenstein: Welcome back to Beyond Prisons. I'm one of your hosts Brian Sonenstein, and I'm joined by my lovely host, Kim Wilson. How ya doing, Kim? Kim Wilson: I'm doing well, Brian. How's it going this week? Brian: I'm doing all right. I'm excited to have another conversation with you today. Kim: Same here. Brian: So what Kim and I are going to talk about today is a book that both of us think is a good starting point for people, especially for people who are new to the topic of abolition. It's a book by Angela Davis, and it's called "Are Prisons Obsolete?", published in 2003, and it's a fairly short book, just a little over 100 pages, yeah. Brian: It provides a pretty succinct overview of sort of the concepts and the frameworks of abolition and just sort of ways to approach thinking about criminal justice , prisons, and their intersection with race and economy, and gender in very succinct and easy to understand ways. And it covers a lot of ground in just a few short pages. It moves pretty quickly, so I personally...it was one of the first books that I read on the subject of abolition. I found it really interesting, and it provoked a lot of thoughts for me that made me go off in a bunch of different directions and look more into the subject. So before we dive in, Kim - do you have any other thoughts just on the book as a whole? Kim: I think that the book really does something that is not touched on by most mainstream conversations on criminal justice - so it places this question, "Are Prisons Obsolete?" not just as a title but as the driver in terms of what is going to happen in the book and things that we should be thinking about. And I think that's a really powerful way to deal with this question of abolition, right. So do we even need prisons, right? That's really what the question's saying. It's like if this thing is kind of outdated, outmoded. You know, in a lot of ways, the question answers itself and it's almost rhetorical, but it's not obvious, right? And I think that's the powerful thing about this book, at least for me. And as you pointed out, it's also extremely accessible so if listeners don't have a background in terms of abolition or they're looking for a place to begin, or they're looking to have conversations in their own homes and their communities and churches and whatever groups they're around, and people that they're with. This is a really good book to do that with, right? Because everyone can read it. It's short, like you said, so it's not like it's 600 pages and it's not heavily laden with a lot of jargon and things. And that makes it, I think, a must-read. It's something that I would highly recommend to have on your shelf. And I keep going back to this book over and over again. I've used it in workshops, I've used it in courses, done tweet-storms about it, and here we are, I'm doing a podcast on it. My book is marked up. It's a handbook. It's not just a book to read and then kind of put away. It's a handbook. Brian: Yeah, and it's almost like a pamphlet, honestly, like a political pamphlet. It's very persuasive and moving in like a very solid argument. And like we've said in all of our episodes so far, it's not perfect. This is a very fluid conversation. A lot of these things are up for debate, but it's a great starting point. On the subject of the title, there's this one part in there where she talks about how the question in itself, like you said, is not an obvious one, but it is an essential one and it is a very powerful one. It's a question that gets to the heart of one of the first things that I want to talk about for our discussion today, and that is something that I actually got quite a bit of feedback on our first episode and some people were telling me that they were really interested in this idea of the inevitability of prisons. Part of our understanding of the inevitability of prisons feeds into this question of why we take prisons for granted as a feature of our natural environment in the first place. And I want to read a couple lines from this book on this subject that I think are really good. So, it begins: At bottom, there is one fundamental question: Why do we take prison for granted? While a relatively small proportion of the population has ever directly experienced life inside prison, this is not true in poor black and Latino communities. Neither is it true for Native Americans or for certain Asian-American communities. But even among those people who most regrettably accept prison sentences, especially young people, as an ordinary dimension of community life, it is hardly acceptable to engage in serious public discussion about prison life or radical alternatives to prison. It is as if prison were an inevitable fact of life, birth, and death. On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, it is absent from our lives. So I think that's one place to start. The prison is, first of all, for black and brown people and for their communities, and I would even say for liberal minded people and white people who are looking to reform the system, to bring relief or reduce harm for their community, even they would accept that the prison is a feature of life in these communities. It's an ordinary dimension of the poverty that we just regrettably accept and there is no attempt to try and explain that. So that is one area. And then, I'll just read a little bit more: To think about the simultaneous presence and absence is to begin to acknowledge the part played by ideology in shaping the way we interact with our social surroundings. We take prisons for granted, but are often afraid to face the realities they produce. After all, no one wants to go to prison. And she goes on to say: We thus think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, as a fate reserved for the "evildoers" to use a term recently popularized by George W. Bush. Remember this book came out in 2003. And because of the persistent power of racism, criminals and evildoers are in the collective imagination fantasized as people of color. So it's always there in the background, the prison. Most of us in America will not see it, so it's displaced. That's in our mind, but out of sight. And it's a place where others go - people who are bad, people who do bad things, they are evil. And in our collective imagination, these are racialized, fantasized people of color. And I think that is a really succinct way to encapsulate how we just accept that the prison is there. And I think that is a really succinct way to encapsulate how we just accept that the prison is there. anything to say about it. Kim: Yeah, absolutely! That passage there - I have that highlighted, underlined, there's notes in margins and little asterisks and what not around that. The important phrase in there for me is that this is the ideological work that is performed in terms of when we think about, that this is the ideological work that is happening That we are supposed to take it for granted by making something that is so ever-present in communities that we feel disconnected from; communities that we outside of what I think are some acceptable parameters. We're talking about human conditions. We can get on board with more humane treatment of incarcerated people but we can't really talk about abolishing prisons because what is that? People are very comfortable talking about popular TV shows that are based in prison and that attempt to depict prison life and glamorize it and romanticize it in a lot of ways, with perhaps some elements of truth in those stories. But again, that also creates a separation and a division and that's part of what I take away from it in terms of this notion of ideological work. So it works on you without you being aware that it's working on you, and that's the whole point right there. Once you clue into that, once you are pushed in that direction. And this is what abolition work does is that it seeks to make invisible. That's really an important point right at the beginning and a really good place to start. Brian: Yeah, and one more thing real quick, and you were touching on it there. And it's the last line of this paragraph actually... This is the ideological work that the prison performs. It relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and increasingly global capitalism. And that's a pretty profound thought if you think about it, because for most people you would equate prisons with responsibility, right? Like the act of incarcerating somebody is forcing them to take responsibility for their actions. But in reality, it's the rest of us just absolving ourselves of responsibility for the conditions that created the situation in the first place. So, I just wanted to just touch on that even one more time because I think it's so fundamental to this. What about you? What are some things that you like in the book? Kim: I think what's useful in terms of what Davis is doing is to lay out in very clear terms there was life before prisons existed. And this notion of taking prisons for granted now is that we can, by taking a historical perspective and having a historical lens go back and say, well, wait a minute. Before we had prisons or at least prisons as we know them today, what was there before? And this is what she's doing in the early part of the text, and she explores the idea that prisons were designed and thought of as the more humane option, which is frickin' mind-boggling!! If you think about it, what? You really have to be in a fucked up place in life to think that prison is a more humane alternative for - those are horrible things, of course. But the idea that putting people in prison and attaching a number in terms of year, quantifying this in terms of years, is a more humane option. And when you think about this, and this is the thing that really frustrates me, (I'll use frustrates right now instead of other 'F' words that I've used), that death penalty abolition folks really advocate and they get upset when you say that life in prison without the possibility of parole is not a more humane option to the death penalty. That these things are just no, you can't do that. So Davis takes us through the early history of the prison and she talks about Jeremy Bentham's "The Panopticon", which I think is an important point in terms of understanding that history. So Bentham imagined a facility where prisoners would believe that they were being observed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And his reasoning for this, and she describes this in the book was fiscal, was financial. It really had to do with the economic savings associated with having people police and surveil themselves. So if you have a bunch of people in cells where the idea is that there is a tower, a guard tower and the guard could see all the prisoners but t during Bentham's time, the idea of the Panopticon has endured, and it has stayed with us. So what frustrates me about this whole thinking around prisons as being a more humane alternative to the death penalty is that we hear this. We hear this same kind of language being spoken by death penalty abolitionists - who are really prison reformers, not abolitionists in the way that any way that I'm thinking about abolition - these are folks who are very much wedded to the idea that life in prison without the possibility of parole, of course is a better option. Well, talk to people who have life sentences in prison without the possibility of parole and ask them if they feel if that is a better option. There's a major disconnect here in terms of those ideas, and I think that this is one of those places where if you don't know much about the history of prisons in our society, Davis does a very good job of laying this out and talking about the idea of how prisons and how the criminal justice system quantifies punishment in terms of years. And how that idea and that notion follows the same trajectory as the rise in wage labor. So we can't disconnect what is happening in terms of incarceration and the history of prisons in our society without also looking at wage labor in this country. The other point that she makes is that early advocates of prison were religious groups and religious people, and that from the design of prisons to the way that we discipline people inside of prisons, that these things were rooted in some religious thinking and it was championed by people who saw themselves as really advocating for more humane treatment of people who were being punished. Everything from monastic existence, solitary confinement, these things have their roots in religious advocates who wanted to transform the society and who wanted to transform the society and this is really a problem. We see this today, we see this happening in prisons all around the country, all around the globe really, today. And we can talk about that you just for what you just for what you just for what you just for what you just are some of the points that you find? Brian: Just going off of what you just for what you just for what are some other things about the book that stand out to you and what are some of the points that you just for what you ju said there at the end, too, I think it's also important to note that the idea behind prisons in their inception and the idea behind the penitentiary as the punishment, is that the results never really played out. Long term solitary confinement that was going on in these very austere conditions where in the late 18th, early 19th century, you literally had basically prison experiments where they were locking people up in all different kinds of conditions and seeing what would "rehabilitate", "emancipate the soul of the individual" and help them recognize their true potential. So this merging of these religious ideas and these industrialist-capitalist ideas that were converging at the time. And then as time goes on and this sort of idea of rehabilitation starts to fall away and then it becomes coddling prisoners. In the mid to late twentieth century becomes coddling prisoners. In the mid to late twentieth century becomes coddling prisoners - providing treatment. This is not punishment enough and so you start to see even the well-intentioned but ineffectual parts of this ideology behind this system just sort of floating away. So I just thought that was interesting. This whole historical conversation is important because it goes both ways. On the one hand, it goes to show that things can change over time and that things are not inevitable. But it also goes to show that there are no clean breaks in history and that there's threads of racism, of other forms of bigotry that go throughout history and allow these systems to not fully be abolished but to change shape while the ideas are allowed to persist. Kim: So one of the passages right here in the first chapter that I want to touch on - it's right on page 10 if anyone has a copy of the text and they want to follow along. She says: Are we willing to relegate ever larger numbers of people from racially oppressed communities to an isolated existence marked by authoritarian regimes, violence, disease, and technologies of seclusion that produce severe mental instability? So she's asking some very big questions here. This is part of the work of thinking through where we are today, how did we get to this point. In going back to, why do we take these things for granted? During our first episode, public policy really doesn't have anything to say about prison abolition. That's not the goal of public policy. Public policy is to work within the frameworks of existing governmental institutions, in policies and laws and what have you, and that's it. So those parameters make it difficult to imagine anything outside of those parameters make it difficult to imagine anything outside of those parameters. However, knowing that prisons don't work. It's like, they don't work. This isn't speculation, this isn't some fantasy. This is... Brian: False advertising. Kim: Exactly! We can look at the evidence, decades of evidence. We can say that prisons have not worked in terms of the deterrent factor. They don't deter anyone from committing crimes. What they do, if anything, is reinforce the structures that perpetuate the problems that we're saying that we're trying to remedy by sending people to prison. So Davis' book attempts to address a lot of these things in a very short period of time. And, for the most part, she succeeds. She succeeds in answering these questions and making that distinction between what reformers want and an abolitionist praxis because it's not just an abolitionist theory or an abolitionist idea or what have you, it really is a way forward. It's not done. It's not done that are impacted by prisons and by carcerality that there's no shortage of work. Brian: Absolutely! Kim: Places where we can, you know, bring in an abolitionist perspective and have an impact, and attempt to imagine and create something different. That said, I think that there is also....she talks about early in the book, she says that if she had to imagine 30 years ago a situation where the U.S. would have over 2 million people incarcerated, living in cages. What? Like no, there were 200,000 people in prisons and that was astronomical then. And then fast forward 30 years, and now we're talking about over 2 million people in cages and over 7 million people under the surveillance regime through other forms of oppression, including parole and probation and what this country is capable of. I have no illusions about what this country is capable of doing. Brian: I mean, how could you at this point? Kim: I can't even imagine right? So if there's like people who are like "there's no way! America would never...." Uh, hello? Where are you? What is going on? Someone failed you. What is going on? Someone failed you. What are some other things that have stood out to you in this book and why do you think it's a useful text for people coming to abolition for the first time or for people looking to learn more, to know more about what prison abolition is and what some of these questions are about? What things stand out to you, Brian? Brian: I think one of the things that I find really important about this book too is that it's not just about prisons but she talks about this dea of punishment in general, our proclivity towards punishment. How there is a whole industry, a corporate industry around punishment. She gets into this notion of the prison industrial complex, which is something that has sort of gained popularity in recent years in terms of our understanding. At the time she was writing this, private prisons were still pretty new, but she goes into a lot of history there and this idea of industrial complexes and how they work, so if.....And I'm sure people who are out these listening to this have heard all sorts of things about the sort of punishment economy, which I think is really important thing for reformers because we need to recognize that just calling something rehabilitation or post release or some program on the inside, it doesn't become good or produce the intended effect just by having its name. And we touched on this in the first episode, there's other books that do a great job on this subject that I would like to talk about someday...But there's this idea, these forms of punishment and these systems that are woven into even our medical fields and our mental health fields that reproduce harm and ultimately re-feed into the prison system. So I think that just this mindset in this conversation about punishment and trying to identify p one thing that came to my mind. Kim: I think that going off of what you just said. A lot of what the book is aiming to do, and does guite well, is to point how the prison really exacerbates social problems and talking about, not just the history of prisons in our society and tracing that trajectory, but in the second chapter, taking us and moving us through the history of slavery and civil rights, and abolitionist perspectives toward prison. And I think that history is also an important part of the conversation and in other episodes we have, we plan to talk about different historical time periods and the implications of them for prison abolition and prison abolition work today. So we're not going to dive too deeply into any of them, but I think it's important to just a little bit because they are in the book. In Chapter 2, specifically, she's talking about, for example, the post civil war structures of punishment in the South. And for those who want to follow along on page 33, I'll read the passage here. It's a rather long passage, so bear with me. She says: Historian Mary Ann Curtin has observed that many scholars who have failed to identify the extent to which racism, color, common sense understanding of the circumstances surrounding the wholesale criminalization of black communities. Even anti-racist historians, she contends, do not go far enough in examining the ways in which black people were made into criminals. They point out, and this, she says, is indeed partially true: that in the aftermath of emancipation, large numbers of black people were forced by their new social situation to steal in order to survive. It was the transformation of petty thievery into a felony that relegated substantial numbers of black people into the "involuntary servitude" legalized by the Thirteenth Amendment. What Curtin suggests is that these charges of theft were frequently fabricated outright. They "also served as subterfuge for political revenge. After emancipation, the courtroom became the ideal place to exact racial retribution." In this sense, the work of the criminal justice system was intimately related to the extralegal work of lynching. There's so much in that one paragraph right there. There's so many layers to what she is doing and what the book gets at in terms of the history of racism in American society. If you're talking about prisons today...And you hear this all the time, you hear advocates say, "this isn't about race". These people have no idea what they're talking about, and don't trust them. That's all I have to say about that. There's no way to look at, honestly look at, honestly look at, honestly look at, honestly look at, but also to draw a through line through history to what is going on today. So you talked about this sort of shape shifting that is going on in terms of policies and laws that make it seem as if these forms of racist oppression have been relegated to a distant past, but they're not. And that's where she begins the book. This is where she is taking us and she's taking us on this journey by explaining this history and making it very clear and lucid the fact that prisons are racist? Just stop! I'm not bothering, I'm not wasting my time. That's just not where I'm going to put my energy. So there's that there for me. What are some other things? Brian: Yeah, the other things? Brian: Yeah, the other thing you raised in the very beginning...She has a really great discussion in here about prisons and gender. And it's a really interesting discussion because it delves into our perceptions of crime and punishment and how men and women fit into that. I'm going to read a little bit here, if you don't mind. I don't have the real book in front of me. I have an e-book so I don't know what page this is on, but hopefully, you will be able to find it. There's a chapter on gender and prisons later on in the book, so it's in there. But, it reads... Kim: It's Chapter 4. Yeah, Chapter 4. It reads: Since the end of the 18th century, when as we have seen, imprisonment began to emerge as the dominant form of punishment, convicted women have been represented as essentially different from their male counterparts. It is true that men who commit the kind of the 18th century, when as we have seen, imprisonment began to emerge as the dominant form of punishment. transgressions that are regarded as punishable by the state, are labeled as social deviants. Nevertheless, masculine criminality has always been a tendency to regard those women who have been publicly punished by the state for their misbehaviors as significantly more abhorrent and far more threatening to society than their numerous male counterparts. And this is something that we should also especially take into consideration because even though there are very small modest declines in the prison population. And a lot of this has to do with breakdown in the economy, with the difficulty of providing for a family and raising children in this economy. But the discussion is also interesting because she goes into how we then treat men and women difference in the perception of prisoners, it should be kept in mind that as the prison emerged and evolved as the major form of public punishment, women continued to be routinely subjected to forms of punishment that have not been acknowledged as such. For example, women have been incarcerated in psychiatric institutions in greater proportions than in prisons. Studies indicating that women have been even more likely to end up in mental facilities than men suggest that while jails and prisons have been constructed as criminal, while deviant women have been constructed as insane. And, so again, I find this really important, too because it goes back to what I was saying earlier about how incarceration as we know it from movies, and television. So I think that's another really interesting part of the book. And that chapter is really great for talking about a lot of the different ways that women are treated in prison is constructed as sort of a male institution that doesn't cater to any of the needs of rehabilitation and survival of women. Kim: Absolutely! Brian: I don't know if you have anything else to say on that. I kind of glossed over a big and important chapter in the book, but does anything come to your mind? Kim: We can certainly go back, but I think that again, what are things that are jumping out to you, things that are jumping out to you, things that are jumping out to you, things that are jumping out to me. We can walk and chew gum at the same time, so we can bounce around the text and not necessarily stick to a chronological order here. But the chapter on gender differences in prisons is an important one. I think it's certainly one that if I have anything to say about it, we're not just going to be part of an ongoing conversation of women, if we're looking at the numbers and statistics here. One of the sentencing project fact in carcerated women and girls says that between 1980 to 215,332 in 2014. A 700% increase in the incarcerated population of women. That's even larger when we're talking about black women. If it's happening to men, it's happening to women, right. And I've read critiques and reviews of Are Prisons Obsolete?, that want to say, "Oh, well she's talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men. Men are at the heart of that, so when people are talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men are at the heart of talking about men." Well the conversation on prisons centers around men are at the heart of talking about men are at the heart of t about mass incarceration, it's about men and boys. So what Davis is doing in this text is to push back against that and say, "Okay, there's an important thing that y'all have been missing here." And here it is. That you need to attend to what is happening with women, because again, in terms of the way that we take things for granted, we don't think of women as particularly criminal. And she says this in this chapter, women tend to get treated as if they're mentally insane. So our behaviors get coded and read and treated differently within the criminal justice system. That's a significant thing for us to understand if we are going to push back against these half-assed reforms that want to neglect the fact that women are being brutalized, terrorized in a lot of ways that mainstream conversations on prisons do not attend to. I think that this is a difficult chapter. It was a difficult chapter for me to read. She does discuss the kind of sexual abuse and sexual violence that women in prison experience. It's not just heart-breaking, but it's horrifying. So they describe and... warning to folks who may be triggered by this conversation that this is really difficult and it can get graphic. Understanding that if you're a teenager, you can be raped by a guard or a staff member at the juvenile facility and that's just not taken seriously, that's ignored. So women are going to prison for often times non violent crimes, drug addiction, other petty crimes. They're unable to afford cash bail, which is a very real thing, and it keeps a lot of particularly poor women, but especially poor black and brown women, incarcerated and caught up in that cycle for a very long period of time. Women lose the right to their children. Women don't get the visitations that men get. I was listening to an episode of Another Round, the one with Remy Ma, and if you haven't listened to that episode, and you're interested in prisons, definitely check it out. It was....I listened to that episode several times because there were so many things that Remy Ma was saying in that episode that speak to what we're talking about here in terms of the conditions in prison for women. Not having access to things like feminine hygiene products, having to organize and ban together against some of the dehumanizing things that are taking place within the prison and how that was something that was really powerful for her. But Davis is doing it in this text, in In Prisons Obsolete or Are Prisons Obsolete...see there you go, I'm changing the title. Brian: (laughs) Yeah, that's the follow-up book. Brian: (laughs) Yeah, that's the one we're writing. But you know, she describes strip searches and strip searches are sexual violence because often times. women are undergoing cavity searches, and you undergo cavity searches under the threat of having to go to the hole, or to the SHU, where you will spend maybe days, if you're not so lucky, if you're not so lucky, if you refuse. So there is no refusal. Yes, it's important to take stock on what is happening in prisons for men and what is happening to men in prison and young boys as well. But in that analysis, we can do both of these things at the same time. We can attend to the problems that are happening with men and also talk about what is happening with women, because women are suffering to men in prison and young boys as well. But in that analysis, we can do both at the same time. We can attend to the problems that are happening with men and also talk about what is happening with women, because women are suffering to men in prison and young boys as well. even more as a result of incarceration. This is n't a system that you can fix. This is really don't see eye to eye on this. For reformers, they say things like, "the system is broken, right." And that's basically saying, okay, a few quick fixes here and there, patching it up and whatever, and we can keep this fucked up system in place and keep it moving. So there's no real stepping back and interrogating whether this is a system that we want to have in our lives anyway. And whose interests are being served by the existence of the prison industrial complex? And abolitionists are like, okay, we understand that there are short-term things that need to happen but this is a long-term goal. This is an ideal. These are the things that we're working towards. We can't just be satisfied with the status quo. We can't just be satisfied with the status quo. We can't be satisfied with substituting one policy that is generally dehumanizing for another less dehumanizing but still dehumanizing policy. Brian: Looking at this quote from the book right now, and it very much illustrates what I think you're saying, and I just two sentences, and this is in, I believe the last chapter, which is about abolition advocacy, and it says... To reiterate, rather than try to imagine one form the book right now, and it very much illustrates what I think you're saying, and I just two sentences, and this is in, I believe the last chapter than try to imagine one form the book right now. single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition. Even just leaving that last part off about not advancing the goal of abolition. I think a lot of these reforms and these things that you just discussed, they don't address male domination that are all central to the prison. Instead, it's about making a better prison, a kinder, a more gentler prison. I wanted to read that quote to people because I think that is the important thing about why prisons are obsolete. Why reform can't work the way that a lot of us would like to hope it would, because I think that is the important thing about why prisons are obsolete. Why reform can't work the way that a lot of us would like to hope it would, because I think that is the important thing about why prisons are obsolete. Kim: I've had that passage highlighted as well and I'm glad you pointed that out because it really is important and it does speak to and the goals of abolition are and the things that need to be addressed. You have to attend to homophobia, you have to attend to misogyny, you have to attend to racism, you have to attend to male dominance. And there's no need or reason to say... well we don't want to talk about this other thing...we'll deal with racism at another time. Again, I think of this as an intellectual equivalent of walking and chewing gum at the same time. We can do both. We can do both. And you have to do these things simultaneously, which is why an intersectional analysis (again, something we raised in the first episode) is important. We don't live single issue lives. If you're poor, or what have you on down the line - that complicates things for you even more. So there is no, let's just attend to this one thing. Let's talk about the men first, you know, and we'll get to you women later. We got time for that, we can do both at the same time. And this is where...I'm sure we'll talk about this in an episode down the road. Brian: Because we assume the inevitability of prisons and they're always there, we fail to recognize that there are some things that are...while you and I would argue nobody belongs in prisons or under the auspices of punishment that just can't...you just can't do that. Women raising children in prison. Obviously, it's important for women to have connection to their children, but why are we prioritizing keeping the women locked up instead of keeping them with their children? Do you know what I'm saying? Kim: Yeah, well, they're looking at that and they're basically saying what these religious reformers in the 18th century were thinking of. You know, they're saying, Oh, well look, it's more humane to not separate mothers from their children. But of all the options that you could have put out on the table, you looked at the range of options and possibilities, and you said, ok having women in their community, and giving them some other kind of support in trying to understand why the women committed 'X' crime, or why we have criminalized certain actions that are committed by women and coded those things as criminal. So if a woman has an addiction problem, an addiction should not lead to a criminal conviction. That is so flawed, and it is out of touch with what the reality of people's lives is. Brian: And then we force them to undergo drug treatment, adhering to that drug treatment, athering to that drug treatment, trying to get treatment in a room full of 30 people where you are coping. Kim: But, you know, that's not even a serious attempt. Brian: No, I know. But we justify these things by pretending they are serious attempts, but they fall apart upon inspection very quickly. Kim: They do, and yet we keep giving money to these programs. But yet these are the kinds of things that judges have to work with. This is the system that we have and this system isn't working Davis talks about the idea of the prison and connecting prisons to safety and security was really sold to the American public in very simplistic terms. It's the same thing. So when people imagine crime, criminals, they have a particular picture in their head of who that is. And that's part of the problem here and that's something that she's doing there. But, again, to your example of women in prison, of all of these options, we couldn't imagine saying... let these women be at home with their children. What can we do to support these women be at home with their children. What can we do to support these women be at home with their children. What can we do to support these women be at home with their children. not just job training for low-level, low-wage jobs, which Davis also touches upon, but really giving them a shot at life. We don't want to see certain people succeed in this country. Giant scare quotes, if other went away, your president would have nothing to talk about. Who would have nothing to talk about. other didn't exist in that sense? So if people did actually have equal opportunity, if people actually have equal opportunity, if people actually have equal opport e did actually have equal opport e did access to not just good education, but decent healthcare, including mental health care, that the world would look very different than it currently does. These are not some far-fetched ideas out there that are somehow going to undermine the fabric of America. If the fabric of America is what it is today, then that fabric needs to be torn up, burnt, trashed, whatever. That's kind of where I am. The book to read in terms of accessibility pointed out but it can be difficult because you begin to get a sense, if you didn't know before, of how enormous this problem is of the prison industrial complex and how much it is a part of our lives. An example from the book ,and one that we all lived, or at least that I lived, or at least that I lived, has to do with when she's describing prison labor, particularly in California, builds the furniture that is used in schools and in universities throughout the state. Here you go, you're at a college university and you think that, ok well the prison industrial complex of prisons...that's something that was built by someone in prison. And you don't know that. That's what she means when she talks about you get to take it for granted. You have no sense of where the things in your're consuming, the things in your daily life are coming from. And the exploitation of people inside of prison is allowing you to have that comfortable life where you don't have to think about it. And that's the problem. Brian: Meanwhile we act like the prison is up there with the sun and the moon. It's all over and she talks about this in the book...she's got a great little section about how important prisons are to literature, to movies, and how we have a whole genre of film, and we don't really pay much mind to that. It's such an important part of our social narrative but we spend so little time interrogating it that you can be...that's the mind-blowing part to me is that you can be...that student, like you were talking about, who could be sitting in a chair made by a prisoner, and not be able to put these things together. That's just another part of the book that I would encourage people to ponder...is an addiction to a lot of this stuff. Just the cultural, where this stuff is, it's all around us and we literally act like the prison grew out of the ground just like a tree did and it's part of Mother Nature. Is there anything else, Kim? Kim: There's just so much in this book that we could spend hours on, weeks on, that one short episode is clearly not going to be all encompassing and comprehensive, and it's not intended to be. This conversation is meant to get people a sense of what they can do for you if you're interested in prisons in general, but a prison abolitionist, specifically. And it also gives you a good starting point if you are trying to develop an understanding around what the counter arguments are to reform. Because I think that's an important way to push back and to contest the prison industrial complex. You need to know what the argument is, but you need to know what the argument is, but you need to know what the argument is an important way to push back and to contest the prison industrial complex. when they say, having chain gangs for women the same way that there were chain gangs for men - that's not a step forward. think that the final thoughts here in the last chapter is, you know, it's a good chapter. There are things that we can expand upon later on, but I think that it gives you a place to think about and to settle on in terms of what are some abolitionist strategies and what you can do in the place of punishment. So punishment is not an inevitable thing. Can we imagine a way to address these kinds of problems that does not automatically, in a knee-jerk response kind of way, say, okay, go to prison? So thinking of punishment in different ways. There's a passage here on page 107, and she says: If it is true that the contemporary meaning of punishment is fashioned through these relationships, then the most effective abolitionist strategies will contest these relationships and propose alternatives that pull them apart. What then would it mean to imagine a society in which race and class are not primary determinants of punishment? Or one in which punishment itself is no longer the central concern in the making of justice. These are questions that people need to start to think about. And these are questions that have to do with prisons and carcerality in this country. And I think that you have to do this if you want to see something different. If you really care about communities and you're true to that. The reform falls short and the reform movement can only get you more of the same stuff. It's not transformational. And that's what I think is really the major takeaway of the book for me. I'm glad that we had this conversation today. I'm looking forward to going back and bringing on guests that can help us think that just really quickly a couple of final things that I would say is that to your last point, I would even go further and say that not only does reform fall short, but it actually is counter-productive in the sense that when you solidify some of these reforms instead of addressing these larger questions of abolition, you've effectively shut down debate for another cycle, and you've given politicians and be done with it, and we can move on to the other ways that we're pillaging the economy, You know what I'm saying? So I think that's something that I've seen as a journalist time and time again, where you have these milque toast reforms, and it's like garbage, but the politicians are like, what, I did it, what else do you want from me? Kim: ...transform anything the seen as a journalist time and time again, where you have these milque toast reforms, and it's like I said earlier, I'm not looking to politicians are like, what, I did it, what else do you want from me? Kim: ...transform anything the seen as a journalist time and time again, where you have these milque toast reforms, and it's like garbage. Politicians that we're seeing, their goal is to get re-elected. Brian: Exactly Kim: There goals are... Brian: to raise money, to get re-elected. I could go in on politician... Brian: book that are going to be really hard to read. They are going to make you feel uncomfortable. And indeed as we go through this podcast, there's going to be a lot of times of introspection out to people, especially people who are new to a lot of this thinking - there are going to be a lot of times of introspection where you feel sort of ashamed of yourself for thinking a certain way for a long time, or having a knee-jerk reaction to call for somebody being in prison for somebody being in prison for somebody being that they did, and that's normal. That's part of this learning process. I just want people not to run away from subjects and topics, if they can, that are difficult for them to a degree that it's healthy, like have them stick around, and just try to sort through feelings. Because so much of this is wrapped up in our cultural identity in America, in our racial consciousness in America, or lack thereof. And so there are going to be times where I feel like some of our listeners are going to be times. And I would say that's a very good thing, and I think this book is a good place to challenge yourself as well. Kim: Just very guickly to those points there... When I was alerting people or signaling that there was perhaps a trigger warning around sexual violence. As someone who's lived this life and is impacted by carcerality in very personal ways that I mentioned before in the first episode, I have two sons in prison, my personal life has been radically transformed and impacted as a result of this. So I find reading these books difficult, and maybe different to people who are new to this and have no background and might be very comfortable in their positions, and this is something that they're picking up and saying, Oh, I'm digging this...this is interesting for me, and I want to get into it. The issue is hard, right. It's hard to re-read, and in taking notes, and I have dozens and dozens of pages of notes on this book already from years of talking about it. Going back over those notes is a difficult exercise for me. So, I was thinking in terms of that because one of the things that I also talk about a lot is self-care and self-care as an activist. So there are times when, as I was going through this in preparation for today, and I was just like, shit, I need to put this down. And I need to walk away from it because it's just triggering. And what I mean by that is that it brings up emotions, and makes it very difficult for you to perceive as if this is just some kind of like novel or something. And novels are really powerful and important, I'm not trying to belittle the impact of novels. But when this is your life, and you're reading it in black and white, and seeing sexual violence being described, particularly in terms of the example that I gave earlier about strip searches I mentioned a couple of weeks ago on social media that my son had been strip searched twice in a 24-hour period. When you think about that, as Davis describes, as other scholars, including Beth Ritchie has described it , as sexual violence, as sexual assault, it's a hard thing to go back. I just feel like, okay, I have to prepare notes for today's episode. So that's where I was coming from with that. If other folks who were untouched by this or feel as though their lives are so completely disconnected from prisons are made to feel a little uncomfortable...good! Too bad. You'll be alright. That's all I got to say, you know. (laughs) I'm less sympathetic to that... But anyway, thank you so much Brian. I really enjoyed talking to you this week. This was great. Brian: Yeah, thank you, and keep an eye out for more episodes from us. Be sure to follow us on Twitter @Beyond prison, and we will talk to you soon. Thank you, Kim! Kim: Thanks, Brian. Take care.

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