Not All Your Neighbors Are Free: Community Building with Incarcerated Folks in San Luis Obispo

By Gianna Bissa

ABSTRACT. The American criminal justice system is rooted in white supremacist ideology that is predicated on the murder, displacement, exploitation, and marginalization of people of color. Scholars and activists recognize the American prison system as a modern form of slavery. Only three miles away from Cal Poly’s campus, the California Men’s Colony State Prison (CMC) operates as one of thirty-four state prisons in California. Nearly 4,000 men, trans women, and nonbinary people are being held at the CMC. Not only can mass incarceration be identified as one of the most dreadful state projects that violates human freedom, but also non-incarcerated community members have little to no means of assuring the safety and rights of those incarcerated. Through combining the narratives of currently and formerly incarcerated folks at the CMC, facilitating meetings with community members, engaging with contemporary scholarship and literature surrounding the American carceral system, and investigating the conditions and programming of other state prisons, I have formulated a plan for programming to be launched in the CMC through the NAACP. The men I talked to in the CMC, though few, all expressed a tremendous interest in restorative justice, social problems, outlets for self-expression, and desire to engage with the outside world. Therefore, my project includes an in-depth analysis and report on prisons, using the CMC as a site of reference and investigation, as well as a tangible plan of action to support and enrich people’s lives by developing a program that prioritizes the folks at the CMC’s longings for community, opportunities, and knowledge.

Introduction
As you are reading this, there are currently “2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 942 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,283 local jails, and 79
Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, and prisons in the U.S. territories” (Wagner, Peter, & Sawyer, 2018). Three miles away from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 3,911 people are being held in the California Men’s Colony State Prison. Following Cal Poly, the County of SLO, the Department of State Hospitals, and Pacific Gas and Electric, the California Men’s Colony is the fifth largest employer in San Luis Obispo with 1,517 staff members (San Luis Obispo [SLO] Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Ruth Gilmore—a professor of geography, author of *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, dedicated community activist and much more—identifies prisons as “geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 26).

Gilmore brings her scholarly work to life through the organizing she does as an activist. She is the cofounder of multiple grassroots organizations, including the California Prison Moratorium Project, Critical Resistance, and the Central California Environmental Justice Network. The front page of Critical Resistance’s website includes its mission statement:

> to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. We believe that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make our communities secure. As such, our work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. (Critical Resistance)

For my senior project I have collaborated with the San Luis Obispo NAACP chapter to start a NAACP branch within the California Men’s Colony. My main research questions are stated as such: what can non-incarcerated folks do to support incarcerated people, and how can establishing an NAACP chapter within a prison empower and/or protect folks?
In the words of Patrisse Cullors, “we need to have a movement around divestment—to divest from police and prisons and surveillance and to use that money to reinvest in the communities that are most directly impacted by poverty and the violence of poverty” (Camp & Heatherton, 2016). This is how Cullors envisions a movement against police violence that also acts as a movement for jobs, housing, and healthy food (Camp & Heatherton, 2016). Communities must recognize that “rather than pursue universal basic income or full employment, California built prisons and expanded the punitive power of the criminal justice system in order to fill them. Since 1984, California has completed twenty-three major new prisons, at a cost of $280-$350 million dollars apiece” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 7). To paraphrase Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s presentation at Cal Poly’s 2018-2019 “CLA Speaks” event on Black politics, social movements, and racial inequality in the United States, “when we’re spending $80 billion to uphold a racist criminal justice system, we’re taking away $80 billion that should go to free health care & quality education for all” (Taylor, 2019).

The Prison Industrial Complex and Contemporary Abolition Discourse
The settler-colonial nation known as the United States of America has been built and continues to be fueled by the disempowerment and exploitation of millions of people. Our government and justice system are sustained by a culture rooted in imperialist, capitalist, white, and cisgender hetero-patriarchal ideology that dehumanizes people based upon their race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. One of the most blatant manifestations of this merciless and discriminatory system is the boom of American prisons. Gilmore (2007) cites that in California alone, “the state prisoner population grew nearly 500 percent between 1982 and 2000” (p. 7). This increase in incarceration was largely a consequence of president
Reagan’s “tough on crime” campaign and legislation. A rising concern surrounding drugs and “criminal activity” resulted in intensified and expanded policing of individuals and communities that were primarily poor and/or Black/Indigenous/People of Color.

While the United States holds less than 5% of the world’s population, we have over 22% of the world’s total prison population. The second percentage likely rises when we include the now 30,000+ people currently incarcerated in Immigration Detention Centers (Global Detention Project, 2016). In Are Prisons Obsolete, Angela Davis presents the term “prison industrial complex” to refer to the relationship between prisons, corporations, and American capitalism. She argues that the incredible expansion of prisons is driven by “ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit” (Davis, 2003, p. 84). Activists and scholars coined the term “prison industrial complex” to combat the popular belief that crime was the root of the mounting prison population and to focus the discussion on white America’s desire to eliminate People of Color, specifically Black people, from American society.

One of Michelle Alexander’s focal points in The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness is the inefficiency of our criminal justice system in solving crime or rehabilitating folks. Alexander notes that governments continuously use punishment as a tool of social control, as frequently observed by sociologists, and that the severity of these punishments is often unrelated to actual patterns of crime. While the “war on drugs” took off with a promise of reducing drug use and distribution in the United States, the methods of enforcing this endeavor were highly hypocritical. According to the NAACP’s Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, white and Black people use drugs at similar rates, yet Black folks are imprisoned for drug charges at six times the rate as whites (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2015). Since Black folks are subjected to police harassment/
surveillance and live in poverty at significantly higher rates than white people, they are disproportionately prosecuted for drug-related crimes. Michelle Alexander (2010) says a war had been declared on young Black men “for engaging in precisely the same crimes that go largely ignored in middle and upper-class white communities” (p. 167).

Jesse McGowan, a lawyer and former Cal Poly student, wrote a report in 2003 revealing that every piece of furniture at Cal Poly is purchased from the Prison Industry Authority (PIA) at the California Men’s Colony where incarcerated folks are making between 30 and 90 cents an hour for their labor (McGowan, 2003). This is exactly what Angela Davis is talking about when she describes the prison industrial complex. Cal Poly and the San Luis Obispo area are involved in this exploitative and inhumane industry and therefore are responsible for advocating for divestment from prison, for the criminal justice system, for policing at large, and for discovering ways to support the people incarcerated in our communities.

Moving Away from Western Frameworks of Justice and Toward Indigenous and Restorative Justice
The concept of restorative justice has ignited important conversation that both criticizes Western epistemological frameworks of crime and provides meaningful and healing solutions for both the perpetrators and the victims of crime. In “Restorative Justice: The Indigenous Justice System,” Carol A. Hand opens a conversation and convergence between traditional Indigenous justice and restorative justice. She delineates:

the western retributive justice system stands in stark contrast to the traditional Native American restorative system. Whereas the former seeks to reduce crime through punishment, restorative justice seeks to re-establish balance and harmony within each individual
affected by an offensive act, within the perpetrator as well as the victim and the community. (Hand, 2012, p. 452)

Indigenous justice generally calls for all affected parties to meet and process how the harmful act disturbed the harmony of those involved as well as the harmony of the community at large. This then solicits a solution for harmony to be publicly restored without the use of tactics such as banishment, isolation, and dehumanization that Western justice systems rely upon (Hand, 2012, p. 452).

Hand refers to “community of relatedness” to define the apparent centrality of relationships within Tribal communities. In contrast, “the legalistic, impersonal approach used by the dominant Euro-American judicial system can best be characterized as ‘a collectivity of strangers’” (Hand, 2012, p. 453). She argues that these strong relationship ties between members of Tribal communities “make police, laws, and other conflict-resolving institutions of larger societies unnecessary, since any two villagers getting into an argument will share many kin, who will apply pressure on them to keep it from becoming violent” (Hand, 2012, p. 453). Since we are discussing Indigenous justice, it is imperative to note that the 356 acres on which the prison is located are in fact occupying Northern Chumash land. In a moment when decolonization is a growing subject within academia and community organizing, we as scholars and community members must be cognizant of how and upon what principles government-funded institutions financed by our tax dollars are being facilitated.

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth is a grassroots organization that disseminates news, holds events, and mobilizes people for community organizing projects in Oakland. Their website page on restorative justice describes how our current American justice system is based on the Roman Justinian notion “to each his due” (Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth). Through this lens,
“pain, suffering, isolation, deprivation, even death are often viewed as the only way to make right the wrong, the only way to pay back the debt and the only way to re-balance the scales” (Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth). Furthermore, they explain how “the retributive essence of our current system has spawned the highest absolute and per capita incarceration rates in the history of the world. Scholars speak of how it has “prisonized” the entire North American landscape” (Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth). Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth says our criminal justice system asks these three questions: What law was broken? Who broke it? And what punishment is warranted? While restorative justice asks: Who was harmed? What are the needs and responsibilities of all affected? And how do all affected parties together address needs and repair harm? (Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth). Restorative justice emerges from justice rooted in Indigenous cultures as it emphasizes justice as reparative, inclusive, and balanced. Ultimately, harmony, relationships, and reparation are the center of both restorative and Indigenous justice.

Recently, I have taken a liking to comparing human societal structures to that of animal societal structures. In “Decolonizing Knowledge: Toward a Critical Research Justice Praxis in the Urban Sphere,” Michelle Fine cites evolutionary biologist Sylvia Kramer’s research on ant colonies. Her findings on procedural tactics of an ant colony when one ant is injected with smallpox are truly remarkable:

As humans, what do we do “when one person is ill or without housing or commits a crime? We banish them, we put them away; we send them far away. So, when she injects one ant with smallpox the entire colony licks that ant clean. And two things happen. One is that ant gets better. And the second is the collective immunity of the entire colony rises. That’s Research Justice!” (Fine, 2015, p. 202).
It seems like we should take some notes from ant colonies when it comes to community health practices. Bell hooks might use an example like this to demonstrate what love in a culture could look like. This example is also a wonderful metaphor for restorative justice and the centrality of relationships in healthy communities.

Andrew Jolivétte (2015) defines radical love as follows:

the activation of a deeply embedded and reciprocal devotion to holistic and ethnic specific self and community care through a balance of human feelings, emotions, and practices that reduce egocentrism while centering a symbiotic relationship between the physical and spiritual as co-constitutive factors of health promotion among Indigenous people and communities of color. (p.8)

This is quite different than the dominating Western philosophy that centers individualism and production. In “Law as a Eurocentric Enterprise,” Kenneth Nunn (1997) highlights the United States’ “self-congratulatory references to the majesty of the law, the continual praise of European thinkers, the unconscious reliance on European traditions, values, and ways of thinking all become unremarkable and expected” (p. 560). It is imperative that we remember:

law was used at each step in the conquest and enslavement of African and other native peoples...whenever the European American majority in the United States desires to ostracize, control, or mistreat a group of people perceived as different, it passes a law—an immigration law, a zoning law, or a criminal law. (Nunn, 1997, p. 558)

Legality does not equate to morality. In fact, in the United States, most laws and procedures are likely aligned with an imperialist and genocidal agenda.

Patrisse Cullors, one of the women who co-founded #BlackLivesMatter, says:
when our political activism isn’t rooted in a theory about transforming the world, it becomes narrow; when it is focused only on individual actors instead of larger systemic problems, it becomes short sighted. We do have to deal with the current crisis in the short term. That’s important. We have to have solutions for people’s real-life problems, and we have to allow people to decide what those solutions are. (Camp & Heatherton, 2016)

As Cathy Cohen stresses, we must turn our attention to structure and resisting the state, as that is what feminism and the liberation agenda is predicated upon. For this reason, I turn to Cathy Cohen’s advice in “Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism.” Cohen (2015) uses the grassroots organizations INCITE! and BYP100 to demonstrate:

working against the prison industrial complex must be focused on improving and transforming the conditions under which incarcerated folk exist, but we must also question the existence of prisons and seriously contemplate a broader structural approach that promotes a prison abolition agenda. (p. 778)

History of the California Men’s Colony and Fieldwork
A report titled “California Men’s Colony from the Inside” references ten different jobs inmates are assigned to work for in the prison. These jobs are listed under the “Prison Industry Authority.” According to this report, “CMC’s (California Men’s Colony) PIA manufactures and ships over $20,000,000 in products each year to other state entities” (2007–2008 San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury, 2007). The report also says:

the PIA work programs also help to reduce prison violence, reimburse victims of crime, train inmates and develop work skills. The inmates gain valuable work experience and develop good work habits that will assist them with job preparation and placement upon release from prison. (2007–2008 San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury, 2007)
What they fail to mention is that prisoners are only paid $0.30 to $0.95 per hour for the jobs they perform under the PIA (Prison Policy Initiative, 2016). Michelle Alexander discusses thoroughly in her iconic book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* that forcing incarcerated people to perform labor only generates profit for the prison itself and not for the people doing the labor. She describes this as a redesigned form of slavery. This becomes even more clear and appalling when reading statistics about how three out of four young Black men in Washington D.C. can expect to serve time in prison (Alexander, 2010).

According to the National Correctional Industries Association, The California Prison Industry Authority (The California Prison Industry [CALPIA]) is a “self-supporting state agency. CALPIA operates over 100 manufacturing, service, and consumable factories at all 34 California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation institutions” (CALPIA). CALPIA allegedly “provides productive work assignments for approximately 7,700 offenders and offers 127 nationally accredited certifications” (CALPIA). The community program manager told my colleague and I that the CMC in fact has the largest PIA system out of all the California prisons. I was also informed that in the CMC, the folks made nearly all the license plate stickers for the state of California. They also make tons of socks and t-shirts. Ultimately, the excuse that there is lack of room for useful programming is given because the inmates must work for incredibly low wages throughout most of their days at the prison.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, or the CDCR, has a page on their website dedicated to their “Vision, Mission, Values, and Goals.” One of their goals is listed as follows:

**Outreach, Partnerships, and Transparency:** Seek out partnerships and develop meaningful programs and
processes to promote shared responsibility for community safety. (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation [CDCR])

The programming I wish to implement within the prison aligns with these goals. Therefore, upon meeting with the community program manager, I presented him my project using the priorities of the CDCR as an incentive for him to approve the NAACP programming. For example, in the CDCR’s 55-page-long strategic plan, they outline the following:

access to meaningful programs and services are important to an offender’s success and lead to improved recidivism rates and safer prisons and communities... continue to engage with local partners and other stakeholders to evaluate performance and improve the array of in-prison and community-based programs that ultimately benefit offenders and public safety, and offer programs designed to promote social values and behaviors in preparation for an inmate's return to the community. (CDCR, 2016, p. 55)

Prison programming that is intentional in its means of providing incarcerated people with news, history, solutions for justice, and psychological healing will ultimately benefit the inmates’ relationships with themselves and with one another to establish healthier senses of self and stronger communities, thus resulting in less criminal or gang activity within the prison.

I believe it is important to critically reflect on the position of this prison within San Luis Obispo county. According to SLO Chamber and Commerce, San Luis Obispo county is 71.4% white while California is only 40.1% white (SLO Chamber and Commerce, 2019). The report also says that San Luis Obispo is 2% Black (Suburbanstats.org, 2019). However, these statistics are skewed as San Luis Obispo includes the racial demographics of people in the California Men’s Colony in their report of diversity. A quick visit to the website “racial dot map” demonstrates how
white SLO is and how Black the CMC is. It is frightening to think that there are approximately 3,000 Black people being held hostage in a prison within a town with less than 3,000 Black residence (Suburbanstats.org, 2019).

Through researching different programs at prisons across California, I have been able to identify models and curriculum that the NAACP can adopt to the group at the California Men’s Colony. I am particularly inspired by programs at San Quentin State Prison. *Ear Hustle* is a podcast produced and recorded inside the prison. The content is created and run by the incarcerated folks, and the podcast is available for free on multiple platforms (Ear Hustle). San Quentin also has its own newspaper that is distributed online. In fact, San Quentin News even published an article on how “Inmates at a Delaware state prison have created an NAACP chapter to litigate for rehabilitation, compassionate release, improved health care, and better living conditions” (Lam, 2018). Furthermore, Richie ‘Reseda’ Edmond-Vargas, an incarcerated man at the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad California, facilitates classes on bell hooks, the patriarchy, and toxic masculinity to his fellow incarcerated folks (Nonko, 2019).

**Conclusion**

As we read and engage with thinkers that condemn the current American prison system and the government at large, we also need to envision what local organizing looks like against these intimidatingly colossal institutions. Thankfully, scholars who are primarily Black/Indigenous/Queer have equipped us with tangible propositions for tackling the prison industrial complex both globally and locally. Creating a NAACP chapter within the California Men’s Colony of San Luis Obispo will serve as an outlet for incarcerated folks at the CMC to gain knowledge about contemporary issues and restorative justice, as well as gain career and educational opportunities
that are available upon release. While abolition is a long-term goal, enriching the lives of people within the system should be a priority for community members invested in those same people’s liberation. Following the work of activists and incarcerated folks is imperative for successful and relevant curriculum and tactics. Through frameworks of radical love and its intersections with restorative and Indigenous justice, we can imagine and create tangible ways to support and improve people’s livelihood and wellbeing, creating opportunities for healthy, meaningful relationships to flourish where there once were none. I would like to thank the NAACP San Luis Obispo branch for allowing me to fulfill such an honorable position as the Criminal Justice Committee chair. I would also like to thank all the wonderful students and community members who supported me in whatever ways they could to make this project possible. I am eternally grateful for an opportunity to do such transformative work that is so close to my heart. I am confident in my successor’s potential to continue to improve this important program and encourage growth within the relationships between incarcerated and non-incarcerated community members of San Luis Obispo.

**Gianna Bissa** is a fourth-year ethnic studies student at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Gianna holds multiple positions that align with their passions and interest in community organizing, decolonial feminist politics, and restorative justice. They are the chair of the Criminal Justice Committee for the NAACP SLO chapter, the Lead Organizer for Students for Quality Education, and the Events Coordinator for Queer and Trans* People of Color at Cal Poly. They hope to pursue careers and opportunities embedded in social justice and liberation.
References


