

Contesting Harm at the Roots: Some Thoughts on The Prison System from a Previously Incarcerated Activist

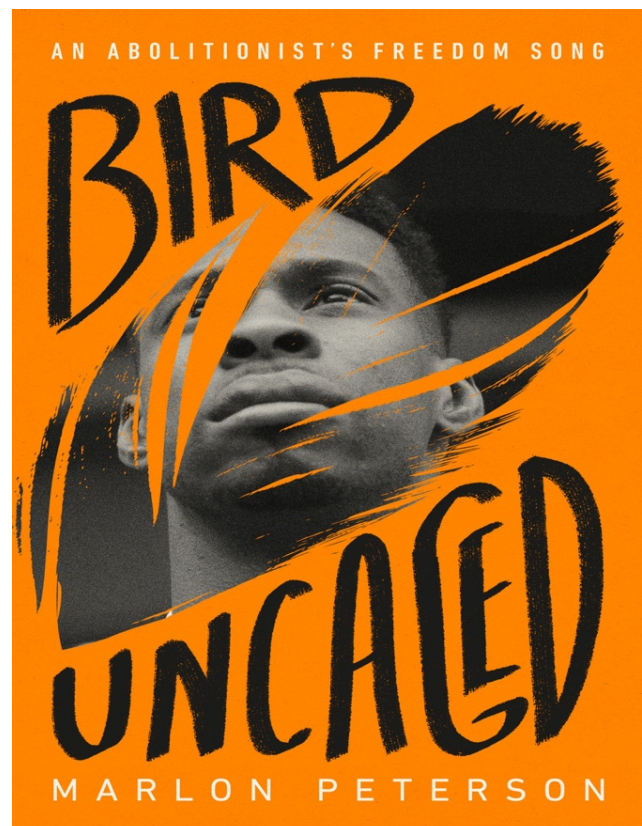
Sithandiwe Yeni and Marlon Peterson

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Abstract: The prison is a commodity frontier. Building on the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Abolitionist Geographies, the prison-industrial complex is indeed a space where especially Black bodies are disciplined and commodified, where accumulation is achieved through structured marginalization and control of those bodies as “surplus,” where denigration of racialized “others” is achieved through ongoing bodily and emotional harm that perpetuates harm, and where resistances contest the very roots of the problem. In this contribution, Stha Yeni speaks to Marlon Peterson, a self-described inspiration whisperer, writer, criminal legal system expert, and public speaker. Peterson spent a decade in a New York State prison, subsequently working in service of, and collaboration with, communities on the prison pipeline and current and formerly incarcerated people. He is the host of the DEcarcerated Podcast and recently published a book titled, *Bird Uncaged: An Abolitionist's Freedom Song*. In this conversation, Yeni and Peterson discuss the concept and practice of abolition, international abolitionist solidarity, community learning and engagement, and breaking chains of harm.

Stha Yeni (SY): Thanks very much for agreeing to do this interview. To start, tell me a little bit about your background and the work that you do.

Marlon Peterson (MP): I would describe myself as more of a writer among other things. Most of my work has been about advocating on behalf of people who have experienced violence, gun violence particularly, but also folks who have experienced the violence of incarceration. Over the years, I've done a lot of work with young people who come from communities of people who are prisoners or from a prison pipeline. So, I've worked alongside, mentored and created programs for young people in my city and most recently I've done a lot of talks, but also a lot of learning and writing about people who experience all those things beyond my community and in different parts of the world.



SY: So, when you say you work with young people from those kinds of communities, what exactly do you do with them?

MP: Well, for most of it, it's me taking time to learn about the root causes of them getting involved in the crimes they get involved in. It's more of a conversation, I don't really come to the community unless there's a long standing relationship, I have with them. I don't go to the community and say, "okay so this is what I'm going to do for you", but it's more so an opportunity for me to learn and share stories of other people. Let me give an example of when I visited a jail in Durban, South Africa. Over there, I did a workshop, and the workshop was about connecting the various struggles of people in other hoods, so they understand that what they experience there is more or less the same experience other prisoners get in the United States of America. I wanted to convey a message to them and make them understand that there are communities of people who are struggling alongside them, who are paving ways for themselves and others. So, it's like solidarity.

SY: How did you get into doing the work that you do?

MP: Well, I went through it myself. You know, I did a bunch of time in prison myself, I experienced both sides of harm in my teenage years, so I got a lot of perspective. You know, spending time inside the prison, I felt there was a place for me to support and have an impact on people who are going through things just like me, so that's what I started doing from the inside. Impact them in a positive way that is.

SY: I want to talk a little bit about your book 'An Abolitionist's Freedom Song'. Firstly, in your own understanding how would you define an abolitionist and secondly, what motivated you to write that book?

MP: To answer the last part of the question, what motivated me to write the book is that like I said, the experiences that I had connected to other people and their stories, so I figured because I'm a writer, let me use this talent and

write this book. I wanted it to connect with many people so they see themselves in it. When it comes to the abolitionist part, I did not start the book by saying "I'm going to write an abolitionist book," hence when you read the book, the word abolitionist doesn't come in until the last couple of pages of the book.

So, to answer your question about what an abolitionist is, I think the first and foremost thing is that an abolitionist is a person who is doing introspection, interrogation on themselves and how they interact with harm on both sides. The harm they have caused and the harm they have experienced. And getting into the root of why they feel about whatever is going on, whether they participate in harm or experience it. Also, how do we move beyond the initial instinct to want vengeance because people want that. I don't care who you are, even if you're the biggest abolitionist in the world. If someone does something to you or your family, your first instinct is to do something back to them. An abolitionist is committed to grappling with that.

So, when I'm writing that book, when you're reading it, you see how I experienced great harm and there is even a chapter where I speak to the person who sexually harmed me. So it wasn't about me saying "why did this happen to me", but it was me wanting to know the initial causes of you wanting to do that to me. When it comes to why I wrote the book, I feel that it was a necessary thing for me to do and when it comes to the abolitionist part, I mean it starts with the individual. I think the abolitionist must look within themselves so that they can see where they are as a person/individually.

SY: Are you a member of any abolitionist movement in the US or anywhere else?

MP: Yes, I mean I work alongside folks and writers, so we come together as writers around this issue. We seek to use our words as a part of the movement and not only our bodies. There are also folks around the world who I've been in conversations with. Australia most recently, New Zealand and also my home country Trinidad and Tobago. So, I want to highlight that the prison police abolitionist movement is

something that is very much grounded in the American global north context in terms of activists. However, because of my travels and conversations with other people, I do know that it's definitely known across the world.

We still have to understand that it requires an understanding of specific contexts globally to apply any of these ideas. It's very different depending on where you're at and that's something I think those of us in America are working on or should be working more on in terms of understanding the way we want to influence these sorts of ideas outside of America. We need to understand that in all parts of the world, there needs to be a shift in how we communicate with other people.

SY: I think you've touched a bit on my next question, but I was going to ask if you could say a little bit more about the status of these abolitionist movements in the US, like are they big? Are they influential?

MP: Well, I want to say yes. I mean we are a lineage of people who have been advocating this since the 60s and 70s. So, with what folks are doing now and what I'm a part of, I want to make it clear that we're not the beginners of it. We're in a lineage of a lot of other folks. We go back to the abolition movement of slavery in the US. These are the descendants of the same thing. In terms of what's happening now, I do believe that the verbiage of abolition or the ideas around it has definitely caught on with us here in America. People have it on their Twitter handles, we have an abolitionist lawyers movement and abolitionist social workers.

And that's good, it's good that people are attempting to interrogate and build out abolitionist sorts of movements in their fields of work. And that's what it's about. Abolition is something we have to build, it's not like math where you get a direct answer, no. It's something that is built. And that's why I say as a writer, I use my words to help build what that is. So, we're all still trying to create an abolitionist world. Obviously if we look in front of us, it's not created yet, but it's good to see that there is much more awareness, more conversation, and more dialogue around it.

SY: Do you have strong collaborations with the activists who are doing similar work but outside of the US?

MP: You know actually, there is somebody I recommend you speak to. Her name is Debbie Kilroy from Australia. She is somebody who also did a bunch of time in prison. There are people around the world like her who I have been in conversations with recently, probably a month and a half ago. These people are interrogating in their local context the abolitionist conversation. There is much more space for much more robust conversations to be had between those in the global north and those in and between the global south.

SY: I assume your work involves doing some research and I would like to know how you approach it. How do you select the communities where you engage and what would you say would be some of your methods of how you enter to build trust and relationships?

MP: I look for the toughest communities, and the way I do that is whatever relationship I have with people from that country or from people who work in NGOs. Also, definitely people from the artistic creative community and finding out who do I know, not only knowing who has access to the community but which people are from those communities. I don't go to any community without being welcomed in. There needs to be some form of introduction. There needs to be a humble approach.

So, when it comes to the research part, I try to do my research beforehand and see what I can read up, which videos should I watch and which people I should contact so they can help educate me on what's going on in that space. But I can say the best information I get is when I'm with the actual people from the community because they are the experts here. When I'm in these particular communities, I don't approach the people by saying "Hey I have these degrees, these books etc." No, I just tell them who I am, where I'm from and I tell them what I've been through and share my story. I don't go there with the approach to extract information from them. I want to be a person that builds communities and becomes some sort of bridge.

SY: I know part of your work also includes going to prisons. I know you speak to people in the communities where they live but you also go to prisons, and how is that process for you? How do you get access to the prisons?

MP: Okay, I'll give you one example. So in Trinidad and Tobago, how I got access to prison was because I knew some people there. I knew some judges in Trinidad and I met with some of the judges and asked them if I can connect with people who are in community programs. That is how I got access, through the people involved in community programs. And for the prison I went to in Durban, I knew a certain person his name is Chris, and he knew people that helped me gain access. However, in certain parts it depends on the kind of a municipality it is and how I am introduced. If they introduce me as a writer from America, then it's easier. I am actually going to another prison soon. So, basically knowing who I know, they help me get access and most importantly they introduce me as a writer who will be there to do a workshop for a book I'm working on.

SY: In this work that you do—and the work of many other activists that you have encountered and worked with—what are some of the alternatives that you are advocating for?

MP: Good question. Well, it all depends on where that country and city is. The reason why I want to engage with people in the community is because the alternative they may be thinking and talking about, they may not have access to people who can pull the strings or put the money in. So, the alternative for me is what people tell me what the alternative should be for them. I have my ideas, but depending on where you're at, it's different in terms of what people need or what people believe they need. So, for me, it's getting an idea.

An example would be in Trinidad for instance, there is a huge gun violence problem. Being in those communities, I've spoken to folks who are gang members and they would talk about getting stuff for kids. Like organizing money and buying book bags for kids and necessities for young people in the community. Which is

amazing right, however, one of those members of the community stood up and said that he's happy that this is being done, however, there are people who are adults like him who can't read and you don't know what that does to those people. And that member looked like he was in his mid-thirties. So, after I left that meeting, the guy who chaperoned me in that community told me that that guy (who said he can't read) is actually a gang member in that area and that it took a lot for him to say that in front of everyone.

So, what I'm trying to say is that there is always a root driven reason for why people do what they do. I'm not saying this as an excuse that just because you do not have proper education that you should become a robber and a killer, no. But what I am saying is that there is a person directly impacted that is saying "this is something that's happening to me" and in some ways, that is a cage. I mean you can't read, that is why you're blocked off from a lot of things in the world.

So, to answer your question, when it comes to researching to advocate for what people want, it is important to go directly to the people because they are the ones that know what they want and what they need. They just need people to listen to them in a trusting and comfortable environment so that they can articulate it. Because at the end of the day, the government knows what these people need, but they just don't care.

People often think that people in these communities do not take care of themselves. However, when you actually go to these communities, you see that that's not the case and that it's actually quite deeper than that. And that is why I go to these communities, because I want to be that person who learns about all of this in a much deeper way.

SY: Thanks for that. I was in a workshop not so long ago with some activists and they were talking about thinking about alternative ways of "punishing." So, basically, how do we deal with harm and how do we hold each other accountable without taking people to prisons

and harming them even further. What are your thoughts?

MP: I know a colleague who always says, “you should do everything.” And I think we’re at a place where people are just trying to do different things to avoid jails and prisons. And I think that’s good, it’s good that people are starting to have forgiveness for each other. But I also think it is extremely difficult work. And I say that because everyone’s instinct is retribution. And that retribution is to personally hurt them back or to let jail hurt them. But it’s also trying to get to the root of that so we can shift the language so we can humanize folks.

Right now in EL Salvador they are currently building the biggest prison in the world. And that has made El Salvador to have the number one jail in the world, surpassing the one in America. As we are having abolitionist conversations, the majority of the world still investing in prisons.

So to answer the question, it’s really shifting the narrative. Here’s the biggest one, what do prisons really do? If we want to be honest. What do they really do for us? Cause as we all know, prisons are spaces of harm. People harm each other there every day. So, at the end of the day, that’s not really fixing the problem, I mean of course you have a couple of people who come out of prison doing well as a changed person. But it’s not because of the prison, it’s actually despite the prison. People like myself, I’ve done well for myself, however, the trauma

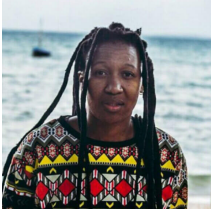
and residual pain of prison hasn’t left, and I still have to deal with that.

So, what I’m trying to say is that the abolitionists role is to get to the root and try new things, so people are thinking about other forms of accountability other than jails and prisons and stuff, that’s them trying new things. But getting into the root and doing the work has to happen at the same time. Like if you look at it in the South African context, where violence is much more prevalent, I’m sure you’d do the history in that neighborhood and go deeper and deeper and using that sort of research, you would get into the root and find out what conditions in the community are leading them to harm each other. That would give you the root.

Now when it comes to your role, that would be creating different programs, being a part of justice circles, therefore we need to be in community together and work together building these alternatives and building these abolitionist visions.

Abolition is a crowdsourcing project, we need to be doing it together from all angles as intellectuals, as academics, as researchers, as practitioners, as gang members. We all must be doing it together, because now what we’re producing is just more harm.

SY: Thank you very much for your time and generously sharing your experiences.



Sithandiwe Yeni is a PhD Candidate at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, South Africa. Her research is on land access, social reproduction, and notions of belonging in rural South Africa.



Marlon Peterson is the host of the *DEcarcerated Podcast*, an Atlantic Fellow for Racial Equity, and the founder and chief re-imaginator of The Precedential Group, a social justice consulting firm. Marlon spent his entire 20's inside of New York State prisons for his involvement in a crime as a teenager. During that time, he earned an Associate's Degree in Criminal Justice with Honors. He spent the last five years creating programs and curricula for men nearing release from incarceration and spearheaded and designed an experiential workshop for incarcerated men and college students.

*All photos provided by the author.

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