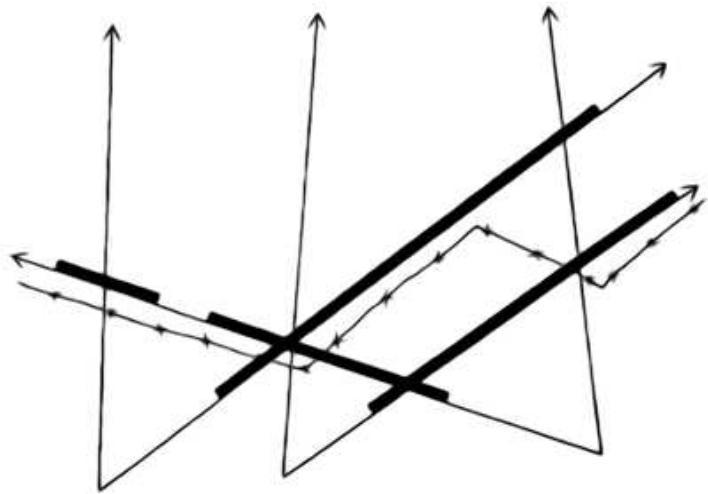
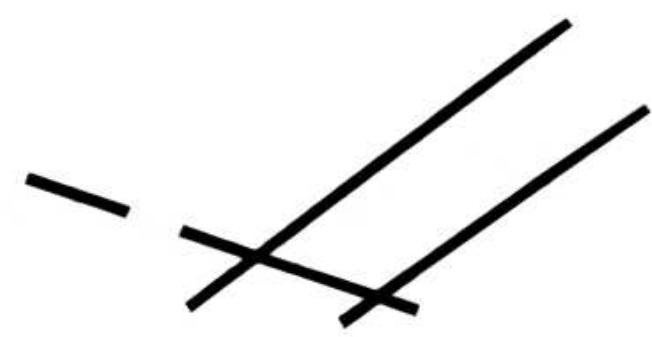


Free Us All

**Participatory defense campaigns as
abolitionist organizing.**

By MARIAME KABA



Originally published on *The New Inquiry* May 8, 2017
url: thenewinquiry.com/free-us-all/

Republished and printed for distribution to prisoners
By True Leap Zine Distro (2022)

Font: Cochin

Free Us All

Participatory defense campaigns as abolitionist organizing.

By
Mariame Kaba

HOW do we free millions of people currently caged in prisons and jails in the United States? As an abolitionist, who believes that we must create the conditions for dismantling prisons, police, and surveillance, I'm often asked how to build new institutions that will ensure actual safety. My answer is always the same: collective organizing. Currently, there are a range of decarceral/anti-carceral strategies being employed across the country to free prisoners, individually and collectively. People are organizing for bail reform, taking on individual parole support for prisoners, engaging in court watches, launching mass commutation campaigns, and advocating for laws that will offer new pathways for release.

Another important strategy to secure the freedom of criminalized people is participatory defense campaigns. These are grassroots efforts to pressure authorities, attend to prisoner needs, and raise awareness and funds. This essay argues that defense campaigns for criminalized survivors of violence like Bresha Meadows and Marissa Alexander are an important part of a larger abolitionist project. Some might suggest that it is a mistake to focus on freeing individuals when all prisons need to be dismantled. The problem with this argument is that it tends to render the people currently in prison as invisible, and thus disposable, while we are organizing towards an abolitionist future. In fact, organizing popular support for prisoner releases is necessary work for abolition.

Opportunities to free people from prison through popular support, without throwing other prisoners under the bus, should be seized.

Defense Campaigns as a Practice of Abolitionist Care¹

An important abolitionist insight is that most prison reforms tend to actually entrench the prison system and expand its reach. 19th century reformers, for instance, created women's prisons to ameliorate the brutal conditions faced by women who had to share quarters with men in prison. But the result was that exponentially more women were incarcerated.

Consequently, it is important to develop strategies that actually reduce the number of people being incarcerated. Defense campaigns are one such strategy. They are an important way that abolitionists can address the needs of incarcerated people without inadvertently strengthening the prison system.

Of course, defense campaigns are most effective as abolitionist strategies when they are framed in a way that speaks to the need to abolish prisons in general. The campaign cannot be framed by a message such as: "This is the one person who shouldn't be in prison, but everyone else should be." Rather, individual cases should be framed as emblematic of the conditions faced by thousands or millions who should also be free.

Speaking at an event celebrating Christina Sharpe's new book "In the Wake," Saidiya Hartman remarked that "care is the antidote to violence." Her words offer a potentially powerful feminist frame for abolition. Effective defense campaigns provide thousands of people with opportunities to demonstrate care for criminalized individuals through various tactics (including letter writing, financial support, prison visits, and more). They connect people in a heartfelt, direct way that teaches specific lessons about

the brutality of prisons. And this can change minds and hearts, helping people to (hopefully) develop more radical politics. In the end, a practice of abolitionist care underscores that our fates are intertwined and our liberation is interconnected. As such, defense campaigns guided by an ethic and practice of care can be powerful strategies to lead us towards abolition.

The Paradox of ‘Protection’ for Black Girls & Women

I’ve devoted most of my adult life to supporting and organizing with Black women and girls. Most recently, I’ve been part of cofounding local defense committees for Marissa Alexander and Bresha Meadows.

Bresha Meadows was fourteen years old last July when she allegedly used the gun that her father had brandished for years against her and her family (terrorizing and abusing them) to shoot him in his sleep. Bresha had learned to fear her father who had repeatedly made threats to kill her and her family. The evidence of her father’s abuse could be seen in police reports, orders of protection, faded bruises, stories from neighbors, cries for help to school counselors, and rumors of sexual violence.

On more than one occasion, Bresha escaped. Each time she was returned to her abusive home. The last time, she ran to her aunt’s home. Her aunt is a police officer, but she could not protect her niece. Instead, Bresha has been charged with aggravated murder. The state didn’t protect her and now she enters her tenth month in jail. Bresha has repeatedly been placed under suicide watch and is facing trial on May 22. The state of Ohio is now her abuser. In late January 2017, as Bresha was being moved from the Trumbull County Juvenile Detention Center for evaluation at a mental health facility, Marissa Alexander was throwing off the

shackles of her ankle monitor after two years of house arrest and three years of incarceration before that.

Marissa's journey through the criminal punishment system began in 2010 when she was confronted by her estranged husband in her home, nine days after giving birth to her third child, a little girl. Menaced by a man, who admitted in a deposition to having abused every woman he'd ever been partnered with except one, Marissa used a gun that she was licensed to own and fired a single warning shot into the air to ward off her abusive husband.

For this, a jury of her so-called peers found her guilty of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon in a 12-minute deliberation. It was that deadly weapon charge that prosecutors used to recommend Marissa be sentenced to a mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years under Florida's 10-20 law. A judge who had previously ruled that Marissa was ineligible to invoke "Stand Your Ground" as a defense because she didn't appear afraid, said that his hands were tied by the law and ratified the 20-year sentence.

Both Bresha and Marissa, a Black girl and a Black woman, are part of the U.S.'s legacy of criminalizing survivors of violence for self-defense. This is particularly true for women and gender nonconforming (GNC) people of color (especially Black people) who are inherently seen as threats, who are never vulnerable, who cannot be afraid, who are always the aggressors, and whose skin is weaponized, making it impossible for them to be considered victims of violence. Women and GNC people of color seem, under the law and in popular consciousness, to have "No Selves to Defend."

Black women and girls in the U.S. have long sought protections from the state for interpersonal violence while simultaneously organizing against the violence of state power. Ida B. Wells-

Barnett was one of the earliest Black women activist-intellectuals to take up Black women's physical and sexual vulnerability as a public concern. The case that she made against lynching was not simply that white people were lying when they said that they were primarily targeting Black male rapists, but also that sexual violence against Black women and girls was ignored and covered up by those same white people. For Wells, and some of the Black club women of the 19th and early 20th centuries, state protection was considered a right of citizenship.

Yet Black women are (more often than not) targets of state violence and when or if ever they are protected by the punishing state, the costs are very high indeed. In some cases, the "gendered paternalism" of the state (a term coined by lesbian and radical feminists of the 1970s) uses Black women as pawns to reinforce racialized criminalization. For "their own protection" and often against their stated wishes, victims of domestic violence are threatened with jailing by some prosecutors or judges if they refuse to testify against their abusers. Over the years, however, the contradictions of demanding protection from the state that also targets and kills us have proved irreconcilable.

It's easy to understand why the oppressed and marginalized want the criminal punishment system to apply its laws equally. Everyone wants accountability when they experience harm. Endless years of activist energy have been expended in reaction to and reinforcement of this corrupt criminal punishment system. But we have to contend with the fact that the system will never indict itself and that when we demand more prosecutions and punishment this only serves to reinforce a system that must itself be dismantled. As Baldwin teaches us: "The law is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer. To respect the law, in the context in which the American Negro finds himself, is simply to surrender his self-respect...."

#FreeBresha & #FreeMarissa in Historical Context

Both Marissa and Bresha's freedom campaigns were inspired by the 1974 effort to free Joan Little, a 20-year-old Black woman prisoner. Defending herself against Clarence Allgood, a white guard who was sexually assaulting her, Joan Little grabbed an ice pick from his hand and stabbed him. Allgood died and Little escaped, eventually turning herself in to authorities a week later and claiming self-defense. She was charged with first-degree murder, which carried a possibility of the death penalty. Her plight soon inspired a mass defense campaign that became known as the "Free Joan Little Movement." Organizations and individuals across the country raised money for her bond and her defense. When Little's trial began on July 15th 1975, five hundred supporters rallied outside the Wake County Courthouse. According to historian Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance*, the supporters "hoisted placards demanding the court 'Free Joan Little' and 'Defend Black Womanhood,' and loud chants could be heard over the din of traffic and conversation. 'One, two, three. Joan must be set free!' the crowd sang. 'Four, five, six. Power to the ice pick!'" Eventually, after a five-week trial and 78 minutes of deliberation, Joan Little was acquitted by a jury and returned to prison to serve time for her original offense, which was a break-in. The case is recognized as the first time a woman was acquitted of murder on the grounds of self-defense against rape. It continues to stand as a testament to Black women's resistance to subjugation and sexual predation.

The "Free Joan Little Movement" is the only example of mass mobilization against state violence on behalf of Black women in the US to date. The Joan Little defense committee organizers focused their campaign on state violence rather than state protection from violence. They remixed the politics of safety and violence and centered the experiences of women of color in their

organizing. They underscored the ways in which the state compounded rather than alleviated violence in the lives of marginalized women.²

This was unprecedented in its time and remains rare today. The work of the “Free Joan Little Movement” approximates what some “justice” looks like: Joan Little alive, with as much love, solidarity and community support for her as she would perhaps have had in the glare of death.

The #FreeBresha and #FreeMarissaNow campaigns, like the Free Joan Little defense campaign that came before it, have taken great pains to underscore that each survivor is one among thousands of Black women and girls who have been and continue to be criminalized for trying to survive. The message now, as it was then, is that all of the Joans, Marissas, and Breshas should be free. Today’s organizers work in the lineage of these lesbian and radical feminists whose politics found their expression in collective defense (a term coined by historian Emily Hobson) and who adopted an organizing strategy of opposition to US state violence. These were feminists who used the politics of collective/mass defense to challenge the intersections of gendered violence and racialized criminalization. These are feminists who would say, in the words of former political prisoner Susan Saxe, “My feminism does not drive me into the arms of the state, but even further from it.”

Abolitionist Organizing in Practice

For many survivors, especially of color, the experiences of domestic violence and rape are inextricably linked with systems of incarceration, policing, and criminalization. As many as 94 percent of the population in some women’s prisons have a history of having been abused before being caged. Once incarcerated,

many cis women, trans women, and gender nonconforming people experience sexual violence from guards and others. The work of the #FreeBresha and #FreeMarissaNow campaigns is centered around these experiences as they've organized for the freedom of all criminalized survivors.³

I am a co-organizer of Survived & Punished (S&P), a coalition of individuals and organizations committed to eradicating the criminalization of survivors of domestic and sexual violence. The members of S&P believe that creating participatory defense campaigns to support the people made most vulnerable to criminalization is essential for educating the public, including prison reformers and abolitionists, about the racial and gendered terror of criminalization and incarceration. We know that campaigns which uplift and defend Black women charged with violent acts, like Marissa and Bresha, are often the only means for securing their freedom. They are also necessary for popular education to strengthen our movements: both by informing and improving overall movement strategies, and by educating to challenge false and damaging binaries that we use to describe incarcerated people, like violent/non-violent and innocent/guilty. Defense campaigns can create new forms of learning and practice necessary for abolition. By organizing to put campaigns like those supporting people in immigrant detention, those criminalized for sex work, and those targeted by transphobic violence in conversation, we can better understand how anti-Black gendered violence and criminalization operate.

However, these short-term strategies need to be placed within a longer-term vision for justice rather than as a substitute for that vision. Thus, it is important first to be clear about the limitations and dangers of some of these strategies. Second, we need to look at how we could reframe this struggle to address the systemic nature of white supremacy, settler colonialism and anti-Blackness. Then, it may be easier to coordinate how a short-term strategy can

support rather than contradict our longer term vision.

Participatory defense campaigns can be a short-term strategy to act in solidarity with criminalized survivors of violence and all incarcerated people.

If you are now convinced to take up the invitation to create abolitionist defense campaigns in support of criminalized survivors of violence and all incarcerated people, here are some key ideas to keep in mind to guide your organizing.

1. Women and gender nonconforming people are not only targets of interpersonal violence but also of state violence. Therefore, discussions of interpersonal violence without a critique of state power and capitalism are at best incomplete and at worst reifications of oppressive structures that are co-constitutive of interpersonal violence.
2. The racial dimensions of gender-based violence must always be addressed.
3. Mass criminalization is gendered: a facet that is too often ignored.
4. It is important to use a politics of collective/mass defense to challenge the intersections of gendered violence and racialized criminalization.
5. Women and gender nonconforming people's rights to self-defense and self-determination must be won through popular support.
6. Acts of self-defense are valid in order to affirm all women and gender nonconforming people's rights to bodily autonomy.

7. It is critical to assert and preserve marginalized people's right to self-defense because we are both under-protected and targeted by the state and sometimes by our own communities.
8. The violent/nonviolent offense binary is an insidious mirage and we must fight for everyone's freedom.
9. Petitioning the state which is set up to kill us for help and protection can be untenable and therefore forces us to consider new ways of seeking some justice.
10. Criminalization itself is sexual violence—a form of state enactment of gendered violence—which is an important reason to oppose it.

11. We cannot focus on addressing vulnerabilities through criminalization, which is always racialized, classed, gendered and hetero-normed. So a focus on criminalized survivors of violence pushes us to ask “How do we create safety outside of carceral logics?”

In March 2015, I had the great honor to moderate a panel at the Color of Violence 4 conference organized by Incite! Women and Trans People of Color Against Violence. The panel included formerly criminalized survivors of violence including Yvonne Wanrow, Marissa Alexander (appearing via Skype), CeCe McDonald, and Renata Hill. Former political prisoner Angela Davis sat in the front row of the audience.

The web of connections between these women was made visible as Marissa told a story of watching the documentary *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* while on house arrest. She said that the film gave her strength that contributed to her survival. CeCe shared that she had a #FreeMarissa poster in her cell while

incarcerated and that reading Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* radicalized her while on the inside. Yvonne Wanrow thanked Angela Davis for contributing to her defense committee in the 1970s. The ethic and practice of abolitionist care links those criminalized to each other and also to us on the outside. Hundreds of us witnessed and understood the importance and value of defense campaigns that night.

The mass practice of decarcerality that intends to win must include fighting to free individuals from cages, and that must include fighting to defend and free criminalized survivors of violence. This will ensure that our movement for abolition is strengthened and can grow. Free Us All!

Author's note•

This essay benefitted greatly from feedback and edits by Alisa Bierria, Nancy Heitzeg, Colby Lenz, Erica Meiners, and Andy Smith. Sincere thanks for your suggestions and ideas.

Endnotes

1. I'm indebted to my friend Alisa Bierria for her help in conceptualizing "abolitionist care" practices and tactics.
2. See historian Emily Thuma's work for more detailed information about the Free Joan Little Movement.
3. While this essay focuses particularly on the plight of criminalized survivors of violence, they are just one example where participatory defense campaigns resonate due to re-victimization by the state and denial of self-defense. From an abolitionist perspective, all prisoners should be freed. There is a long history of participatory defense campaigns that have focused on people criminalized for dissent and/or for actions taken as part of social justice organizing (see cases of the Black Panther Party, American Indian Movement, and MOVE members among others). Abolitionist organizing eschews the idea of "innocence" as salient in dismantling the prison industrial complex.

“Some might suggest that it is a mistake to focus on freeing individuals when all prisons need to be dismantled. The problem with this argument is that it tends to render the people currently in prison as invisible, and thus disposable, while we are organizing towards an abolitionist future. In fact, organizing popular support for prisoner releases is necessary work for abolition.”