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It's #PrisonAbolition Until the Bad Guys Show Up:
Conflicting Discourses on Twitter about Carceral Networks in 2020

An Honors Paper for the Department of Anthropology

By Tam Phan

Bowdoin College, 2021

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ABSTRACT

“Twitter Revolutions” in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Moldova illustrate social media’s capacity to mobilize citizens in uprooting systems of injustice. As non-democratic regimes, these “Twitter Revolutions” offer insight into how Twitter’s microblogging, hashtags, and global user connections help broker relations between activists hoping to challenge the government. However, this thesis focuses on the democratic regime of the US and how Twitter plays a role in aiding the prison abolition movement in their effort to dismantle carceral networks that inflict racial and political violence on Black, Brown, Indigenous, and People of Color. The thesis outlines how, under the US’ classification as a democracy, the US utilizes infrastructural power to coerce American citizens into accepting carceral networks of violence as essential institutions to maintain civil society. The following sections explain the abolitionist movement’s history of attempting to dismantle the discrete formal and informal institutions of political violence, and includes the complicating development of liberal-progressive reformism that attempts to co-opt the goals of the abolition movement. The thesis focuses on the Twitter hashtag #PrisonAbolition in 2020 to explore how American Twitter users perceive the US carceral state and the prison abolition movement. The research concludes that #PrisonAbolition does not currently possess the capacity to evolve into the social mobilization seen in the “Twitter Revolutions” of non-democratic regimes because the US’ infrastructural power effectively engrained into the minds of Americans that prisons protect civil society. However, the tweets still show a promising development as American Twitter users become more engaged in abolitionist conversations.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“I went from ‘ehhh idk about abolition’ to ‘tear every last piece of this bullshit down’ in less than a month.”

—@crissles via Twitter Jun 5, 2020

Scrolling through my Twitter feed in 2020, I noticed my timeline—usually filled with strangers’ random thoughts, political news, and casual conversations between my followers—became dwarfed by tweets about abolitionist readings, videos of inmates pleading for better COVID-19 guidelines in their prison facilities, and harsh criticisms made against the US government by young college students. As I continued down the rabbit hole of reading the thread of tweets related to abolitionism and injustices within the prison systems, I was reminded of courses that examined the emergence of “Twitter Revolutions” in Middle Eastern and Soviet-bloc countries. Specifically in Egypt, “social media [has] been an integral part of political activism... showing, for instance that 54 out of 70 recorded street protests from 2004 to 2001 substantially involved online activism” (Lim 2012, 232). Iran’s 2009 Green Movement, Tunisia’s involvement in the Arab Spring, and Moldova’s 2009 anti-Communist protests also involved high levels of online activism that led to mass social mobilization (Rahaghi 2012, Arnold and Sampson 2014, Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009). These “Twitter Revolutions” demonstrated the capabilities of social media in instigating and sustaining social movements that challenge the authority of the regime.

As the presence of pro-abolitionist and eye-opening claims against the US prison system continued to dominate my Twitter timeline, I noticed that my peers also began to engage with these tweets and even posting their own pro-abolitionist opinions. Three months of the constant exposure to prison abolition related tweets and videos eventually “radicalized” me to become critical of US prison systems and how the US maintains institutions that continue to oppress

marginalized populations. Reflecting on the observations seen during the “Twitter Revolutions,” I became motivated to pursue research that explores how Twitter contributes to the proliferation of social movements. Although the prison abolition movement existed on Twitter for years, the high volume of tweets engaging with the movement during the summer of 2020 pointed to what I believed were the beginnings of a social movement against US carceral networks. Since #PrisonAbolition emerged relatively recently in comparison to other movements such as #Abolition, #BLM (Black Lives Matter), and #ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards), I focused my research on #PrisonAbolition in hopes of starting the discussion of a new and not yet researched social movement on Twitter. Given my curiosity about the potential for #PrisonAbolition to replicate the social mobilization demonstrated in the “Twitter Revolutions” through processes of radicalizing Twitter users and promoting collective action for mass protests, I developed the research question central to this thesis: Does the current momentum of the Twitter hashtag #PrisonAbolition in 2020 indicate possibilities of a cohesive social base forming that would lead to an on the ground social movement against the US prison system?

Twitter as a Site for Cyber-Ethnography

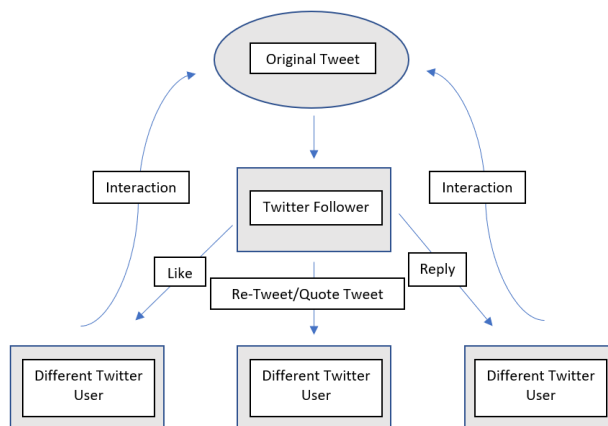


Figure 1 - Chart of information flow between Twitter users

Twitter's microblogging capabilities, which limit tweets at 140 characters, create a social media landscape that exposes users to a vast array of knowledge and opinions in a relatively concise and rapid manner, in comparison to social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, or YouTube. The global manner in which Twitter users engage with one another, demonstrated by Figure 1, creates an online community that enables Twitter users to form connections all over the world. As each Twitter user publishes a tweet, their followers engage with the tweet through liking or retweeting it which results in the original tweet reaching a broader national and global audience than the original Twitter user intended.

Although Twitter's large communication network actively exposes Twitter users to a variety of conversations that arise in the Twittersphere, a report explains that the 80% of published tweets come from only 10% of the Twitter user population in the US (Wojcik and Hughes 2019). Of the small population of Twitter users that publish the majority of tweets, roughly 36% identify as completely Democrat and 60% identify as leaning Democrat (Wojcik and Hughes 2019). With a Democrat leaning US Twitter population, this creates echo chambers in the Twittersphere where "most of Twitter really is the same people talking" (Bell 2019). As US Twitter users interact with these tweets created by a small population that actively shares their opinions online, the spread of a single Twitter user's tweet has the potential of influencing the opinion of many.

Hashtags serve as a method for entering a Twitter echo chamber. In Twitter's "Trending Topics" page, it lists the viral hashtags that contain the highest number of tweets and engagements among Twitter users at the time. For this research, I enter the echo chamber of the prison abolition movement by collecting tweets from #PrisonAbolition. Through #PrisonAbolition, the community of US Twitter users who actively contribute to the

conversation creates an alternative landscape for ethnographies because of the exposure to different perspectives across a larger scale unrestrained by physical boundaries. Researchers already engage with Twitter as a cyber-ethnography landscape because it provides them with a large Internet community connected to each other by their interests in the hashtag or social movement (Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017, Bonilla and Rosa 2015, Byrds, Carson, and Richardson 2017, Parikh and Kwon 2020, Juris 2020). Similar to the articulation of echo chambers, Bonilla and Rosa define “hashtag ethnography” as the method “of reorienting social media ethnography from an emphasis on ‘network and community’ toward a focus on individual experiences, practices, and socialities” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 6). Hashtags offer a more defined and narrower search into a broader discussion on Twitter. Also, hashtags include a smaller subset of subject-centered tweets that share a personal narrative or opinion, similar to how ethnographic interviews gain insight into the interviewee’s beliefs. Delving into #PrisonAbolition, this research focuses on the subject-centered tweets found in the prison abolition movement echo chamber on Twitter to understand how American Twitter users engage with the hashtag and their views on the movement.

Framework

Before entering the analysis on #PrisonAbolition, I dedicate the following chapters to explaining the history, dynamics, and current manifestations of the American carceral state and abolition movement. In “Chapter 2: The Carceral State,” I explore state formation and state coercive power theories of accredited scholars (Tilly 1990, Weber 2004, Mann 1984, Gramsci 1989). By developing the theoretical foundation that explains how the US’ origins embed carceral networks into the governing structure of civil society, I open by investigating the modern-day practices of political violence in the US prison system. The chapter aims to describe

the discrete methods of dominance practiced through infrastructural power that the prison abolition movement seeks to dismantle. In “Chapter 3: Abolition,” I introduce abolitionist anthropology (Shange 2019) as a field that relates directly to the values of the prison abolition movement since both critique the US’ oppressive history and carceral institutions. Drawing from the understanding that the US effectively embedded prisons as normalized and essential institutions in civil life, the chapter examines how the co-optation of the abolition movement by liberals leads to reforms that further crystallize carceral networks. The chapter addresses the hurdles of reform and liberalism that the abolition movement faces and explores the death penalty abolition movement as an example of abolitionist success. By differentiating the outcomes of reforms through liberal co-optation and the campaigns of the death penalty abolition movement, the chapter provides a foundation for the analysis of #PrisonAbolition as the conflicting discourses in the hashtag allude to the differences between liberalism and abolition.

In “Chapter 4: #PrisonAbolition,” I describe the Twitter data collection process and the details of the quantitative analysis methods used to assign sentiment values to the tweets. I perform sentiment analysis on the tweets to make the process of selecting tweets for the qualitative analysis as objective as possible. The qualitative analysis works on the combination of tweets selected from the polarity of the sentiment values and tweets with the highest levels of engagement in #PrisonAbolition during 2020. From the analysis of #PrisonAbolition tweets, the chapter examines the conflicting perspectives among American Twitter users about their relationship with the US prison system. Some tweets display complete support for the prison abolition movement while others share some support but still maintain some hesitation to the concept of completely eradicating prisons. The chapter evaluates these differing viewpoints as it relates to understandings of coercion through infrastructural power and the conflict between

liberalism and abolitionism. The analysis on #PrisonAbolition concludes with the assessment that the conflicting arguments regarding the prison abolition movement illustrates that the hashtag does not currently possess the capabilities of evolving into mass mobilization seen in other “Twitter Revolutions;” however, the presence of tweets that directly attack the US prison system does indicate that continued abolitionist discussion and use of the hashtag may benefit the prison abolition movement as it illustrates that Americans can see behind the veil of the US government’s coercive infrastructural power.

CHAPTER 2: THE CARCERAL STATE

“It is as if prison were an inevitable fact of life, like birth and death.”

—Angela Davis, 2003

In this chapter, I explain theory in social sciences that defines and analyzes the carceral state and the history of the US as a carceral state. The carceral state describes the methods of dominance that manifest themselves through formal institutions (policing, judicial courts, detention centers, and prisons) and informal institutions (surveillance technologies, dispossession, and criminalization). Professor Ruby Tapia elaborates on the definition by clarifying that

“the carceral state encompasses the formal institutions and operations and economies of the criminal justice system proper, but it also encompasses logics, ideologies, practices, and structures, that invest in tangible and sometimes intangible ways in punitive orientations to difference, to poverty, to struggles to social justice and to the crossers of constructed borders of all kinds.” (French, Goodman, and Carlson 2020)

The exponential growth of these formal carceral institutions, specifically prisons, in the US illustrates an abuse of state power. Beginning with the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia that held 250 inmates in 1829, the American prison system paled in comparison to the extensive number of gothic prisons in Western Europe (Benson 2019, 18). Now, the US prison system exceeds that of any other country as it incarcerates people at a rate of “698 per 100,000 residents” (Sawyer and Wagner 2020) and “holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian Country jails” (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). If prisons are only a part of a wider system incorporating “logics, ideologies, practices, and

structures, that invest...punitive orientations” to difference or poverty, as Tapia notes (French, Goodman, and Carlson 2020), then this increase in the number of Americans imprisoned suggests a parallel elaboration of intangible aspects of the carceral state.

The social and political consequences of imprisonment work to create a space for punishment. Writing about the US’ evolution from gothic to modern day prisons, author Sarah M. Benson contends that “as part of an iconography of civil death, the [prison] door was the state’s representation of a transformative departure to a place without political status” (Benson 2019, 16) Keeping faithful to the original meaning of the prison institution, prisons today also represent civil death. Benson defines civil death as the “passage from the world of the free to a place beyond civic status” (Benson 2019, 16). However, modern prisons ignore the secondary aspect of prisons that Benson mentions, which grants prisoners “the possibility of a return—of being ‘recalled to life’” (Benson 2019, 16). Formerly incarcerated individuals continue to experience the consequences of civil death since re-entry into civil society faces barriers in the labor market, housing, public assistance, and voting rights. Rather than promoting rehabilitation, the permanence of civil death contributes to higher recidivism rates. The US Department of Justice confirms this by documenting in a 2018 press release that reported the recidivism rate in 3 years at 68%, in 6 years at 79% and in 9 years at 83% (“5 out of 6 State Prisoners Were Arrested Within 9 Years of Their Release” 2018). The dispossession of the political and civil liberties of incarcerated individuals demonstrates the lasting impacts of the carceral state.

Although the carceral state purports to organize and control society, the reality of the US prison system indicates that the carceral state serves to dispossess and reinforce racial dominance over historically oppressed populations. The carceral state’s deeply rooted networks in social,

economic, and political life enables racial discrimination in US politics. Mass incarceration dominates the discourse on the US prison system; however, Professor David Rodriguez posits

“that the term ‘mass incarceration’ makes little sense, if only because the actual historical technologies of incarceration have never targeted an undifferentiated ‘mass,’ but have consistently pivoted on the gendered racial profiling and criminalization of Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, poor, and colonized peoples.” (Rodriguez 2019, 1583)

Therefore, targeted mass incarceration provides a more accurate phrase for describing the US policing and imprisoning practices. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2016) documents the targeted mass incarceration of these historically oppressed individuals by reporting that “African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is 5.1 times the imprisonment of Whites, and Latinos are imprisoned at a rate that is 1.4 times the rates of Whites” (Nellis 2016). The difference in racial treatment continues inside the prison system as 48% of Black Americans make up the population of people serving life sentences, while Black Americans make up only 13% of the US population (Sawyer 2020). Contrastingly, White Americans only make up 32% of the population of people serving life sentences, while making up 61% of the US population (Sawyer 2020). The differing realities of White Americans to Black Americans in their relationship with the prison system reflects how political violence acts as an extension for racial discrimination.

The carceral state encroaches on the political and civil liberties of Americans. The government’s reliance on the carceral state to organize civil society reinforces inequity. For this chapter, I examine how the carceral state became intertwined with state building by connecting the comparative political theory from sociologists Charles Tilly, Max Weber, and Michael Mann and the anthropological theory from philosopher Antonio Gramsci. I continue by examining how

prisons become normalized and how the carceral system created the prison industrial complex. By focusing on how violence became intertwined with the state and how states effectively managed to normalize institutions of violence, this chapter creates a foundational background for abolitionist goals and provides an explanation as to how the normalization of oppressive institutions makes it difficult for the abolitionist movement to reach a larger support base.

The Carceral State Literature Review

While many theorists agree that the carceral state serves to control the citizenry under the government, some address the carceral state through their formal institutions and others examine the informal institutions that uphold the carceral state. In Tapia's expansive definition of the carceral state, she alludes to the varying ways the carceral state penetrates civil society. Formal institutions exist as the tangible methods of state violence, while informal institutions exist as the logics of control over the citizenry. To understand the nature of the US carceral state in both dimensions, I discuss foundational theories of the state and state violence through the theories of Tilly, Weber, Mann, and Gramsci.

Carceral networks help states establish control over their territory by monopolizing the legitimate use of violence. Writing in 1919, Max Weber clarifies "that the state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory—and this idea of a 'territory' is an essential defining feature" (Weber 2004, 33). The carceral state acts as the physical manifestation of the state's monopoly on violence. With the territorially bound political unit under the control of the state apparatus, the state organizes its civil society by exercising political violence. Tilly demonstrates Weber's claims by examining the 16th century state building in feudal Europe. After the transition from feudalism into statehood, "the rulers of European states took advantage of all these conditions to

move toward monopolies of the larger concentrations of coercive means within their territories: armies, police forces, weapons, and courts” (Tilly 1990, 68). As European statehood developed in legitimacy, the monopolization of violence developed in tandem. Mann’s earlier work (1984) similarly argues that “the state is still nothing in itself, it is merely the embodiment of physical force in society” (Mann 1984, 186). Mann furthers our understanding of statehood by introducing the concept of infrastructural power, which defines the coercive strategies that give states the ability to negotiate with its citizenry. Infrastructural power acts as the “logistics of political control” (Mann 1984, 186), which penetrates civil society through political and social institutions that influence the political ideology of the citizens. Since statehood derives power from its ability to exercise its monopoly on violence, infrastructural power keeps the citizenry in support of the government’s decisions. From the perspective of these scholars, not only do states depend on violence, but the development of the carceral state is inevitable in modern states.

Informal institutions also work to protect the state’s monopoly on violence. Informal institutions penetrate civil society and coerce citizens to voluntarily give their consent for the government to exercise its power. Gramsci explores this complicated process by outlining that “the ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony...is characterized by a combination of force and consent which balance each other so that force does not overwhelm consent but rather appears to be backed by the consent of the majority” (Gramsci 1989, 156). Similar to the functioning of Mann’s infrastructural power, Gramsci argues that political hegemony requires political involvement to balance the relationship between the state and its citizens. However, Gramsci differs from Mann as Gramsci’s assessment on hegemony argues that nonpolitical institutions can guide the development of political and cultural hegemony. While Mann derives coercion and consent through governmental institutions, Gramsci explains how the ruling class intellectuals’

confusion of “cultural unity with political and territorial unity” (Gramsci 1989, 139). reproduces norms that align with the political hegemony. The alliance with the political hegemony results from the state apparatus’ ability to successfully exercise domination over the individual. The continuation of informal institutions in the carceral state reflects the state’s ability to manipulate its citizenry in providing consent and reproducing the political hegemony.

Current literature regarding Twitter’s impact on the relationship between citizenry and the state leading up to social movements analyze the success of these “Twitter Revolutions” based on their ability to dismantle formal carceral institutions in primarily non-democratic states (Rahaghi 2012, Arnold and Sampson 2014, Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009). The “Twitter Revolutions” that occurred in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Moldova came in response to the states’ use of despotic power to control their citizenry. As Mann explains, despotic power contrasts with infrastructural power in that it relies on the state’s repressive capacities to coerce its citizens to support their regime (Mann 1984, 188). In Iran’s Green Movement, protestors used Twitter as a communication tool for mass mobilization during protest performances against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad’s reportedly fraudulent 2009 reelection (Rahaghi 2012, 151). During the Arab Spring, Tunisian and Egyptian protestors utilized Twitter to create social networks for mass protests against the repressive regimes (Arnold and Sampson 2014, 511). Similarly in Iran, protestors in Tunisia, Egypt, and Moldova mobilized their pro-democracy protests via Twitter (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009). In all these case studies, they focus on Twitter’s role in non-democratic states that overtly practice political corruption, repression, and violence.

This thesis adds to the current literature of “Twitter Revolutions” by examining the role of Twitter in a democratic state, specifically the US, and aims to evaluate the beginning stages of a potential abolitionist movement that actively challenges the US carceral state. Since the US

coerces its citizenry through infrastructural power, the claims the prison abolition movement makes against the US government struggle with connecting to a broader support base because of the discreteness of the political violence practiced by US' carceral networks. Focusing on a democratic state that utilizes infrastructural power to coerce its citizenry contributes to the literature on "Twitter Revolutions" because current analyses on the topic rely heavily on the already present factors of state-led violence and consider Twitter as a complementary aspect to social revolutions. Since the US practices political violence on Black, Brown, Indigenous, and People of Color less overtly, the analysis on Twitter focuses more on how Twitter hashtags could kickstart a social movement. By defining the patterns of state formation of Western countries, the intentional process of normalizing prisons into the US' democracy image, and the political violence demonstrated through the prison industrial complex, this chapter outlines the abuses of power within the US' infrastructural power that the prison abolition movement attempts to address.

State Formation

Governments utilize carceral networks to bargain with their citizenry (Tilly 1990, 115). In Tilly's most recognized aphorism that "war made the state, and state made the war" (Tilly 1990, 67), he argues that early state building relied on mechanisms of violence to establish control over the citizenry. As war presented an external threat to the ruling class' property, the necessity for a properly governed security apparatus emerged. The state guaranteed protection from external threats, leading to "the increasing tendency of states to monitor, control, and monopolize effective means of violence" (Tilly 1990, 68) in the newly created governing system. Based on the social contract between the state and its citizens, citizens agreed to the legal rules of society in return for the state's guaranteed security. The state practiced the monopolization of

violence by punishing citizens who broke the social contract. Weber's 1919 lectures pairs well with Tilly's modern analysis of state formation by claiming that "the modern state can be defined only sociologically by the specific *means* that are peculiar to it, as every political organization: namely, political violence" (Weber 2004, 33). By affixing the modern state to the exercising of political violence, Weber argues that modern states can only exist if it holds the exclusive right to practice methods of dominance over its citizenry. For the state to maintain its longevity, it must coerce its population to willingly relinquish certain civil liberties.

The state formation's reliance on the monopolization of violence becomes evident in Tilly's analysis of 16th century feudal Europe. The persistence of territorial wars between Europe's feudal states kickstarted the feudal ruler's recognition of the power from monopolizing violence. As European states dealt with an abundance of wars during the 16th and 17th centuries, "preparing for war, paying for it, and mending its damage" posed a financial issue that "multiplied state expenditures through most of the continent" (Tilly 1990, 74). Presented with the issue of securing funding for the wars, state formation arose out of necessity to manage state budgets, collect taxes and debts, and securing the citizenry through whom the state can extract funds from. The organizational demands of war making resulted in state building that utilized institutions from the carceral state to organize its citizenry. As the wars concretized the territorial boundaries between the European states in the 18th century, the state apparatus created "the organizational division between armed forces oriented to attacks on external enemies (armies) and those oriented to control of the national population (police)" (Tilly 1990, 75). Demonstrated by the formation of an army and police force, the state coerced its citizenry to accept its exercise of domestic violence in return for the protection against external threats.

Although external threats to European states declined by the 18th century, the constant preparation for war and

“the nationalization of military forces during the previous century had already drawn most European states into bargaining with their subject populations over the yielding of conscripts, war materials, and taxes; immense citizen armies like those of the Napoleonic Wars entailed an unprecedented invasion of everyday social relations by the predatory state.” (Tilly 1990, 115)

The bargaining became difficult as the state continued to extract resources from the citizenry without the bargaining power of protection from external threats. The decrease of external threats reduced the allure of a state system that provided security; as a result,

“European states began to monitor industrial conflict and working conditions, install and regulate national systems of education, organize aid to the poor and disabled, build and maintain communication lines, impose tariffs for the benefit of home industries, and the thousand other activities Europeans now take for granted as attributes of state power.” (Tilly 1990, 115)

States began to invest in infrastructural power to garner the support of its citizens. The inclusion of social welfare programs and resources under the umbrella of the state’s responsibilities became an additional task for the state to complete. Without the development of infrastructural power as a bargaining tool, the state loses its ability to monopolize violence and extract from its citizens.

The formation of modern states exists on the foundation of state extraction from its citizens to create wars. Based on Tilly’s argument behind the state building process in Europe,

welfare programs provided by states existed as a bargaining tool for the state apparatus to secure its citizens' support. Therefore, the central organizing features of state building—coercion and violence—paved a future where injustice and statehood coexist in governing civil society.

The Normalization of the Carceral State

Carceral institutions, namely the prison system, repelled people's curiosity by capitalizing on an image of despair. The prison's physical attributes and the mental cage it represents originated from the state's effort to deter civil society from breaking legal and social norms. In Benson's analysis of 19th century literature, she explains that

“[Nathaniel] Hawthorne drew the reader's attention to prison architecture and the prison house door, he challenged the naturalization of the iron rivets as symbols of the state's right to deprive the citizen of the body in the gothic prison and suggested that prison reform was an attempt to redesign an institution that could not be repaired” (Benson 2019, 18).

Hawthorne's assertions in the *Scarlet Letter* provides a valuable perspective to the moment prisons transitioned from fearful gothic structures to institutionalized brick and mortar structures. The reimagination of prisons as plain buildings pacified the fear attached to the appearance gothic prisons. The normalization of the prison institution started as an effort to reduce the stigma connected to imprisonment. However, as demonstrated in Foucault's analysis of the removal of public torture to a system of courts and prison, the reformation of carceral violence “reinforces the principle of secrecy” (Foucault 1975, 37). The secrecy allows for the state to practice political violence onto the body without the concern of drawing public controversy and removes the criminal-justice system from the minds of average citizens.

The US government intentionally transformed the prison structure into a more palatable appearance for civil society to protect the prison system as it serves as an extension for the government to exercise violence. Benson describes the transformation as the development of the “shadow carceral state, the long relationship between the federal and state prisons was not about federal weakness and state control, but about engineering the public embrace of a prison built to look like democracy” (Benson 2019, 26). Considering the theories from Tilly, Weber, and Mann, the US’ decision to normalize prisons aligns with the state’s monopolization of violence. Building prisons into the democracy positions prisons as essential institutions that maintain the order of civil society. Rather than existing as an institution of repulsion, the prisons become an institution of necessity to punish and isolate criminals. Davis explains that “people tend to take prisons for granted [because] it is difficult to imagine life without them” (Davis 2003, 15). While Davis contends that fear lingers in the perception of prisons, civil society’s attachment to prisons demonstrates the success of the shadow carceral state in democratizing prisons. Reforming the appearance of prisons demonstrates the effectiveness of the state’s coercive strategies to elicit the voluntary consent of its citizenry by framing prisons as essential. As citizens become increasingly secure that prisons contribute to civil society, movements to abolish prisons receive public criticism as impractical and harmful.

Prison Industrial Complex

The prison industrial complex illustrates the ever-growing relationship between the carceral state and civil society. Reflecting on the history between the state and its citizens, state investment into political and social institutions serve the government’s self-interest to consolidate power. Foucault accurately describes the relationship between the state and incarcerated individuals—

“this political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but on the other hand, its constitution as a labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjugation; the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (Foucault 1975, 25-26).

In the prison industrial complex, political and economic interests become embedded in the prison system. As a capitalist society, the subjugation of a large population inside the prison system provides a source of cheap and unlimited labor. Davis describes the prison industrial complex as “the transformation of imprisoned bodies—and they are in their majority bodies of color—into sources of profit who consume and also often produce all kinds of commodities” (Davis 2003, 88). The prison industrial complex illustrates how the state’s monopolization of violence intersects with racial discrimination and the capitalist economy.

The prison industrial complex’s supply of the cheap and unlimited labor of imprisoned individuals draws from the history of racial discrimination in the prison system. During the late 1800s after the abolition of slavery, contract leasing programs in Mississippi prisons reincarnated slavery practices. The convict leasing system originated as “a scheme in which white policymakers invented offenses used to target Black people: vagrancy, loitering, being a group of Black people after dark, seeking employment without a note from a former enslaver” (Stevenson 2019). Convict leasing allowed for businesses and farms to lease the labor of convicts for no pay and under harsh conditions. The 13th Amendment’s exception clause clarifies that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the US, or any place to their jurisdiction” (“Amendment

13.S1.1.2 Exceptions Clause” n.d). While not legally considered slaves, the 13th Amendment’s exception clause transported slavery into the prison system. Despite the ending of the contract leasing program, the 13th Amendment’s exception clause still upholds an avenue for the state to exploit prison labor. Currently, prisoners endure forced labor to earn meager pay and “punishments for refusing to do so include solitary confinement, loss of earned good time, and revocation of family visitation” (Benns 2015). The exploitation of prison labor reinforces Foucault’s theorization that political investment originates from the existence of a productive and subjugated body. The US invests in the prison system to produce the subjugated bodies that work to benefit the racist and capitalist society.

The emergence of new prisons demonstrates the prison industrial system in action as it serves the capitalist economy. In Letcher County, Kentucky, the capitalist argument promotes the need for new prisons in impoverished areas. The county justified the development of a 1,200-person facility by arguing that it would “create up to 300 jobs,” and that “when Congress allocated the \$444 million to build a new prison, the commission members called it a ‘great Christmas gift to Letcher County’” (Meagher and Thompson 2016). With a median household income of less than \$32,000 (Meagher and Thompson 2016) and structural unemployment due to the county’s dependence on coal jobs, the massive government expenditure on prison development overlooks how direct government funding into the county could drastically improve quality of life. Since taxpayer money pays an average price of \$36,299.25 per federal inmate (Spengler 2020), the redirecting of federal funding away from communities demonstrates how the US government acts mostly for economic self-interest. This example of Letcher County supports Davis’ assertion that investments in prisons take away from meaningful social and economic investment in a community. The US’ fixation with expanding the prison system stems

from its benefit to the capitalist economy. In 2018, prisons amassed a total of \$74 billion in economic benefits, with privatized prisons making up over 10% of the total (Kincade 2018). Roughly 400 companies, the biggest being Correction Corp. of American and the GEO Group, contribute to the US prison system (White 2015). Companies such as food, furniture, employment, surveillance, and banking all contribute to the prison industrial complex. With prisons fixed at the center in the economic system that upholds these various companies, investment into prisons rather than communities become the primary goal of the US state that acts in its economic self-interest.

Conclusion

Statehood cannot exist without the carceral networks that maintain the state's monopolization of violence. As the carceral networks become increasingly entrenched in democracy and capitalism, they continue the practice of racial and political violence in the prison system. Davis addresses the concern of the US' stealth normalization of the prison system by stating that "it has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond prison" (Davis 2003, 19). The origins of the carceral state predates the current generation by centuries and demonstrates the effectiveness of the political hegemony to reproduce knowledge that elicits the voluntary consent of its citizenry. While the US' infrastructural power effectively managed to hide the prison system under the guise of democracy, the humanitarian dangers of the carceral state presents an urgent need to reframe the reality of the prison system. Rather than as a core civil institution that protects the citizenry, the carceral state exists as a mode for the state to exercise dominance over historically oppressed populations residing in American territories.

CHAPTER 3: ABOLITION

“Abolition starts at the end of the world.”

—Savannah Shange, 2020

The foundational institutions of American statecraft—capitalism and carceral power—require state organized oppression of targeted populations for them to exist as functioning institutions in contemporary America. Capitalism and carceral networks maintain a comfortable quality of life for the majority. In the vision of the founders of the US Constitution, the White, educated, and property-owning cis male made up that majority. Capitalism works in coordination with the coercive strategies of carceral power to exploit Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals for labor while also dispossessing them of the agency to liberate themselves. The problem of “what racial history produces, or threatens to do, is an organization of power that, ceasing entirely to be a humanism, has become a violence itself: a system of control that can be all-encompassing because it cannot be compassed in turn by *subjects*” (Marriott 2011, 52). In the US, the institution of capitalism and the carceral state build on the racist history of exploitation of enslaved non-White individuals. The oppressive practices that existed during the chattel slavery era continue to persist in the modern-day interpretations of capitalism and the carceral state. In opposition to the discrimination toward non-White individuals, the abolition movement seeks to address inequalities by dismantling the foundational institutions of Western civilization that exploit the labor of non-White people.

Abolitionist Anthropology

Abolitionist literature exists heavily within the historical contexts of the slavery abolition movement; however, abolitionism reemerged in contemporary America to critique the carceral networks. Anthropology Professor Savannah Shange introduces the study of abolitionist

anthropology, which draws on the decolonizing anthropology movement, to apprehend “the necessary conjuncture of antiblackness theory and a critical anthropology of the state” (Shange 2019, 7). Existing literature on abolitionism owes its foundation to the Black, Brown, and Indigenous academics, authors, and activists who recognize the existence of the racist, violent, and oppressive institutions and social norms that exist within the US. As the work of preceding abolitionists led to the America that exists today, the continuation of oppressive institutions disguised under reforms and liberalism require a continued abolitionist effort to create a truly liberated America. Shange hopes for abolitionist anthropology to “transpose the analytic choreography of decolonial anthropology onto the late liberal US: *one more time from the top, this time on the right foot*” (Shange 2019, 8), and contemporary abolitionist literature honors Shange’s sentiment by critiquing US institutions and providing pathways for abolitionism.

Understanding the relationship between the normalization of the carceral state into US statehood and the populations the carceral state targets helps for abolition and who the movement needs to advocate for. Benson argues that “prison abolition, as an idea with a very long life, requires learning from the history of [targeted] mass incarceration about the processes that entrenched the carceral state” (Benson 2019, 121). Benson explains that the permanence of the carceral state into US statehood developed as a slow and intentional process that relied on the ignorance of the White Americans about carceral violence and the economic dependence on the exploited labor from non-White individuals. Abolition seeks to dismantle the carceral institutions that benefit from the oppression of dispossessed peoples. The abolition movement confronts the larger task of addressing the carceral network, “that is, incarceration *as a logic and method of dominance* [that] is not reducible to the particular form of jails, prisons, and detention centers, and other brick-and-mortar incarcerating facilities” (Rodriguez 2019, 1587). Therefore, abolition

must engage with the elimination of all forms of dominance—physical, mental, and social. Shange makes a direct call for the decentering of White and non-Black People of Color in abolition movements since “this mode of racial solidarity cannibalizes Black suffering,” and becomes a “performance of racial analogy [that] is both cathartic and politically strategic” (Shange 2019, 3). As the centering of White and non-Black People of Color in the social justice movement could risk the possibility of ending in reform rather than abolition, the movement requires collaboration with and centering of the perspectives of Black and Brown individuals.

Liberal-Progressive Reformism

According to Rodriguez, the liberal-progressive reformist movement’s fixation on practicality and reality regarding social, political, and economic change conflicts with the values of abolitionism (Rodriguez 2019, 1602). The term liberal-progressive reformism draws directly from Rodriguez’s definition that “liberal-progressive reformism attempts to protect and sustain the institutional and cultural-political coherence of an existing system by adjusting and/or refurbishing it” (Rodriguez 2019, 1577). From the liberal-progressive reformist perspective, the impossibility of the abolition movement successfully dismantling current oppressive institutions and creating new mechanisms to govern and organize society delegitimizes the movement. The reform movement, co-opted by liberal and progressive party followers, attempts to provide a solution to the gaps of abolitionism by working for change within the existing systems. While good intentions exist in the reformist movement, instead of creating productive change in the US’ carceral networks, “reform reproduces fundamental relations of dominance, violence, and systemic vulnerability” (Rodriguez 2019, 1593). Evident in prison and policing reform movements, the result of reform solidifies these carceral networks into US statehood rather than uprooting these oppressive institutions. In this chapter, I examine the pitfalls of liberal-

progressive reformism by juxtaposing Shange's 2019 ethnography of Robeson Justice Academy and Rodriguez's 2019 analysis of chattel slavery. I show how these cases reinforce Davis' emphasis on abolitionism as a primary mechanism for political change.

The liberal-progressive framework fails to fully comprehend the level of oppression the carceral networks practice on Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. Shange shares the political and social atmosphere of southeast San Francisco to illustrate how liberalism and social justice does not equate to the liberation of oppressed communities because "as a framework, carceral progressivism brings our attention to the continuities between racism and antiracism" (Shange 2019, 15), without making substantive efforts to promote institutions for antiracism. While liberal intentions to create a post-racial environment for Robeson Justice Academy show support for Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, the disproportionate levels in which Black students receive disciplinary referrals and expulsions in contrast to their non-Black counterparts replicate the existing systems of the school to prison pipeline that disproportionately criminalizes Black students. In Shange's interaction with Kate, a white teacher at the social justice academy, the conversation demonstrates the clashing realities between the White authority figures and young Black girls who attend prestigious schools. Kate explains that some Black students did not deserve their spot in Robeson because they did not behave as a social justice student should. Kate utilizes her authority status to support her reasoning as she laments that

"If I can't really be a social justice educator because I have just a couple of kids being cray-cray, then how are we any different? And I want kids to know that they are in a special place. And I want them to treat it like they're in a special place" (Shange 2019, 115).

Kate's confession foreshadows her resignation from Robeson Justice Academy due to differences with the administration on how to discipline students. Although Kate expresses to change her passion to inspire students into social justice careers, her fixation on students of color to assimilate to her standards of professionalism eventually conflicts with the progressive policies of the academy. The example of Robeson Justice Academy perfectly demonstrates Rodriguez's critique of progressivism as the "liberal-progressive reforms of the carceral-racial state constitute an intensive, historically specific remapping, and reimagination, and rearticulation of the durable white supremacist entitlement that characterizes liberal futurity" (Rodriguez 2019, 1608). Rodriguez examines this liberal futurity in a larger scale than Shange based on his analysis of the future created from the abolition of slavery and the 13th Amendment. While the 13th Amendment gained notoriety for the abolition of slavery, the amendment reconfigures slavery into a more digestible institutional structure that predicated on a form of punishment for criminal behavior (Stevenson 2019). Due to the continuation of exploitative labor practices following slavery abolition, this story of abolitionist success aligns more closely with liberal-progressive reform. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass laments that the "work of Abolitionists is not done...[since] slavery has been fruitful in giving itself names" (Douglass 1865, 85) and that the amendment became a "'new skin' of the racial chattel power relation" (Rodriguez 2019, 1581). Evident in the existence of the prison-industrial complex and targeted mass incarceration of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples that benefit from the cheap and exploited labor of these prisoners, slavery exists under the refurbished institution of the prison system. With liberal-progressive reformism, White and non-White activists believe their efforts result in productive social justice; however, evident in the existence of racial violence toward Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals in liberal and non-liberal institutions, these

reforms dismantle the obvious forms of oppression and redesign them into more discrete forms of dominance that the majority American population are unaware of existing.

The abolitionist perspective toward the prison system advocates for uprooting the system because of its mirrored image to chattel slavery. Functioning as an institution that exploits Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals for the purpose of labor and removing their constitutional rights, the prison system should draw controversy but the result of many progressive reforms on the prison system remolded the prison as a digestible and acceptable institution among the majority American population. The success of prison reform makes it so that “the prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it” (Davis 2003, 10). With that harrowing reality, Davis recognizes the potential dangers of continued liberal-progressive reform of the prison system and provides prison abolition as a more ethical alternative in response to the carceral state. The development of the prison-industrial complex demonstrates the permeation of the prison system into the economic, political, and ideological realms of US statehood. With the permanence of prisons due to the liberal reforms that concealed their controversy, the prison-industrial complex exists as a problematic and dangerous carceral state power—“whether this human raw material is used for purposes of labor or for the consumption of commodities provided by a rising number of corporations directly implicated in the prison industrial complex, it is clear that Black bodies are considered dispensable within the ‘free world’ but as a major source of profit in the prison world” (Davis 2003, 95). Abolitionism seeks to liberate the Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals who have been targeted by carceral violence and who have been forgotten by the masses that exist comfortably within the liberal-progressive mindset.

Liberal-progressive reformism exists as a larger threat to the abolition movement because reformism invalidates the practicality of abolitionism and concretizes carceral networks in US statehood by making these institutions palatable for the American people. The dangers of the reformist movement directly deprive Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals from their ability to imagine a future without the existence of institutions that target their communities for means of production and dominance. In Shange's work, her ethnography on the Robeson Justice Academy demonstrates the present harms of liberal progressivism as the school performs as a liberal institution while still upholding the dynamics of discrimination toward their Black students. As Professor Rodriguez and Davis reconnects the prison system to its historical ties with chattel slavery, they argue that the prison system cannot ethically coexist in an America that seems to present itself as a liberal-progressive society. With the conflicts arising from liberal-progressive reformism and the emboldening of the carceral state institutions as a result, abolition presents a possible solution to deterring the growth of a complacent liberal American future.

Abolition in Practice: The Death Penalty

Closely related to the prison abolition movement, the abolition of the death penalty provides an example of how effective action planning results in achieving abolitionist goals. Through engagement in contentious politics—“interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actor's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets” (Tilly and Tarrow 2006, 7)—the social movement to abolish the death penalty succeeded in petitioning 22 states to make the death penalty illegal (“State by State” n.d). Contentious politics describes the interactions between the government and social movements that disrupt the status quo by calling for a specific change within the government. Tilly and Tarrow define social movements as a continuous claim-making

campaign that attracts supporters into their social networks by using protest or advertising performances (Tilly and Tarrow 2006, 11). Although the abolish death penalty movement began in the 1900s and still works to convince the other half of America to abolish the death penalty, the success stories of the 22 states demonstrate an effectiveness of the abolish the death penalty movement's planning. By examining the successes of the death penalty abolition movement, other social movements can draw from its example to achieve abolition.

The expansion of social networks factors as a crucial aspect for the success of social movements. Focusing on the advertising performances, attracting a wide population of supporters legitimizes the movement. For death penalty abolition, pop culture plays an essential role in humanizing incarcerated individuals and exposes the inhumane nature of the death penalty. Films such as *The Green Mile* (1999), *Clemency* (2019), *Just Mercy* (2019), and more provide complex perspectives on the death penalty. In reviewing *Clemency* and *Just Mercy*, Miller explains that the films "want audiences rethinking the death penalty and America's prison-industrial complex" (Miller 2019). While the influence of films and pop culture seems superficial, Adkins and Castle's research on college students concluded that "a renewed scholarly interest in the political influence of popular movies is clearly warranted" as Democrat and Republican identifying students shifted their political views after viewing films related to health care (Adkins and Castle 2013). Adkins and Castle argue that popular films possess the capabilities to sway the attitudes by presenting political messages in a subtle manner that would convince the viewer they developed that political belief independently (Adkins and Castle 2013). Drawing from Tilly and Tarrow's explanation of contentious politics, a wider support base would benefit a particular social movement because it expands the number of claim-makers

against the government. By forming a large social base of unconditional supporters, social movements can create sustained campaigns.

Tangible actions against the government through protest demonstrations or legal battles increases the chances of success in claim-making. For the death penalty abolition movement, legal battles in the Supreme Court legitimized the social movement as a political claim-maker against the government. The gradual escalation of the death penalty abolition movement from public protests in the 1950-1960s to Supreme Court cases in the 1970s demonstrates the death penalty abolition movement's ability to effectively manage action plans that would garner the attention of the federal government ("A History of the Death Penalty in America" 2012). The 1972 case of *Furman v. Georgia* pivoted the death penalty abolition movement in a stronger position to influence state opinion to make death penalty illegal as

“the Supreme Court declared capital punishment unconstitutional as it was applied. The court said the death penalty was a violation of the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment because of the inconsistency in who was given the death penalty.” (“A History of the Death Penalty in America” 2012)

With the strike against the death penalty's legality in *Furman v. Georgia*, the case illustrates the effective attacks the death penalty abolition movement manages to carry through without changing the radical abolitionist values. In 2020, the momentum of the death penalty abolition movement continues as Colorado joins the list of states as the 22nd state to abolish death penalty (“The Death Penalty in 2020: Year End Report” 2020).

The death penalty abolition movement demonstrates how abolitionist activists can achieve their goals. With 22 states abolishing the death penalty, this abolitionist movement

provides a clear example of how abolitionist values can come to fruition without devolving into a reformist movement.

Abolitionist Possibilities on Twitter

Twitter's landscape provides the potential for social movements to capitalize on pop culture, everyday interests, and news broadcasting to spread abolitionist values. An understanding of how various Twitter accounts spread abolitionist views helps social movements figure out how to connect to a large social base. To address the range of Twitter users, the commentary on abolition-related Twitter accounts will focus on entertainment and political public figure accounts.

The Twitter account @rwigilmoregirls, named Ruth Wilson Gilmore Girls, falls under the entertainment category as the account parodies *Gilmore Girls* scenes with quotes from Ruth Wilson Gilmore's lectures and published works. The profile bio for @rwigilmoregirls states "it's a good theory in practice for people engaged in the spectrum of social justice struggles to figure out unexpected sites where their agendas align." As the bio centers social justice in their description and the majority of @rwigilmoregirl's content focuses on abolition, the account demonstrates a clear commitment to spreading an abolitionist agenda.

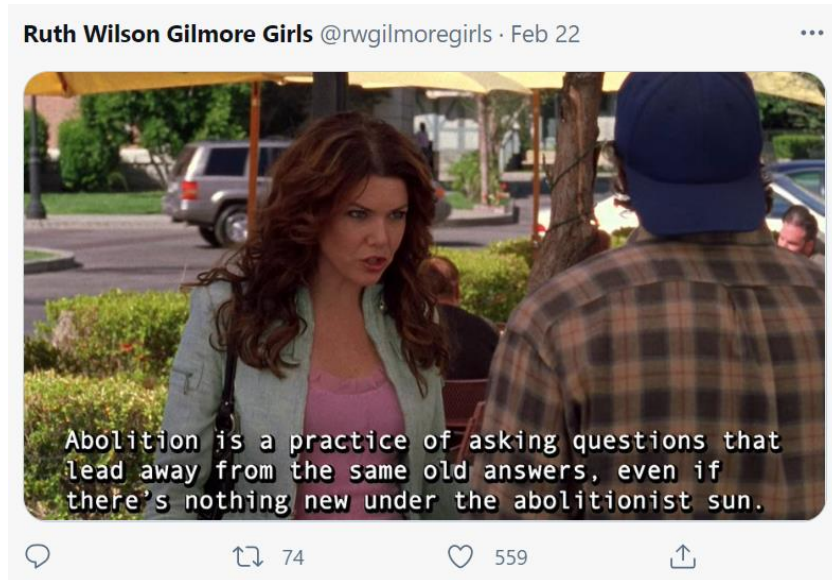


Figure 2 - @rwgilmoregirl's tweet

Illustrated in Figure 2, @rwgilmoregirls combines the interests of *Gilmore Girls*' viewers, followers of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and aspiring abolitionists. While @rwgilmoregirls parodies both the *Gilmore Girls* show and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the tweet shares a serious message regarding an abolitionist value of dismantling existing institutions. The tweet attracted 559 likes and 74 retweets, proving that @rwgilmoregirls method of spreading abolitionist knowledge captures succeeds in reaching a broader audience. Even though @rwgilmoregirl's follower count of 27.4k people indicates an already large social base, the likes and retweets function to gain the attention of the mutuals of @rwgilmoregirls' followers. On Twitter, mutuals refer to someone who you follow and who follows you back.

The Twitter account @akhan1437, named Adnan Khan, classifies as a public figure due to his high follower count of 32.6k Twitter users. Although @akhan1437 does not contain a blue checkmark next to his name to verify a celebrity status, the high follower count indicates his ability to reach a large population when spreading a message about abolition. In @akhan1437's personal bio, it states "Human Being. Husband. New Dad. Muslim. Immigrants' son. Formerly

incarcerated. Executive Director of @restore_cal. He/Him. #BLM. Opinions/RT=my choice.”

Based on @akhan1437’s bio, his connection to the prison system and profession in the criminal justice reform career illustrates his credibility as a public figure in the abolition realm.

“I would still be in prison if our bill (Senate Bill 1437) was not retroactive. It makes ZERO sense to make a law wrong for ppl moving forward, but not for those currently in prison. This is a very harmful political game that so many legislators play with our lives.”

—@akhan1437 Feb 25, 2021

@akhan1437 provides a personal narrative to share his opinion of the importance of Senate Bill 1437, With the tweet attracting 457 likes, 92 retweets, and 9 replies, the high engagement illustrates a positive reception among Twitter users. By personalizing the issue, @akhan1437 mimics a similar trend seen in Blevin’s #Ferguson research that concluded the personalization of certain topics made them more dynamic and alluring to other Twitter users (Blevins, Lee, McCabe, and Edgerton 2019, 1649). Given that Twitter users follow @akhan1437 for the purpose of keeping updated on prison related policies, the social base that @akhan1437 appeals to is already aligned with a more progressive or radical view on prison abolition.

Conclusion

As abolition exists in a state of constant reconciliation with historical injustices, it “is not a synonym for resistance; it encompasses the ways in which Black people and [their] accomplices work *within, against, and beyond* the state in service of collective liberation” (Shange 2019, 10). Abolition becomes a movement broader than the narrow goal of dismantling oppressive institutions, rather it acts to address contemporary inequalities and eradicates the oppressive dynamics. As an action, the collectivization and subsequent mobilization of peoples

in support for abolition opens the possibility for the abolition movement to effectively achieve its goals that have been historically usurped by liberal-progressive reformism. By following the example of successful social movements, future abolitionist endeavors would benefit from building upon existing frameworks to attract supporters and to engage with government institutions.

CHAPTER 4: #PRISONABOLITION

“The biggest cognitive dissonance for me in educating myself about #prisonabolition is how 2 reconcile wanting it while accepting that it means ppl like this cop wouldn't end up locked up. I believe in restorative justice but I also think some folks are beyond that. What do we do?”

—@LHadjiivanova via Twitter June 17, 2020

In this chapter, I examine how #PrisonAbolition frequency and sentiment changed over time between 2015 and 2020. I refer to the changes between 2015 and 2020 to assert that Twitter users' understanding of #PrisonAbolition in 2020 illuminates a new development on how Americans perceive the US carceral state. As American Twitter users continue to engage with #PrisonAbolition by sharing their perspectives about the US prison system, the dialogue opens to the possibility of the prison abolition social base expanding. My concentration on #PrisonAbolition tweets from 2015 and 2020 attempts to reveal how discourse on Twitter reflects a growing suspicion of the US carceral state among average Americans and how hashtags promote the spread of shared ideologies that eventually evolve into on the ground mobilization. I begin my analysis by sharing my process of collecting the tweet data from 2015 to 2020 and by simplifying the programs I used to perform the quantitative analysis. The second part my analysis uses a different tactic, quantitative sentiment analysis, to locate a shift—a distinction between 2015-2019 and 2020—and to identify a sample of tweets to analyze in a qualitative way. The qualitative analysis focuses on #PrisonAbolition tweets in 2020 and shows the heterogeneity of those tweets. The evaluation of the tweets will give insight into the status of the prison abolition movement as it exists on Twitter and what that reflects for the future of #PrisonAbolition.

Methodology of Tweet Analysis

My research explores Twitter as an additional landscape in which Americans engage in conversation about carceral state and abolition. I focus on Twitter because its social networking format allows for average Americans to include themselves in highly active conversations with other American users outside of their social circle. The virality of certain hashtags that arise from Twitter's algorithm signals which conversations currently dominate the screens of American users. Twitter's high level of engagement among Americans creates an optimal environment for sampling peoples' opinions on a specific topic. For the research, I focus on #PrisonAbolition to get an understanding of how many users engaged with the hashtag and to create the dataset that I refer to in my analysis.

I created a Twitter Developer account to gain access to the Twitter codes necessary for extracting the tweets for my dataset. Twitter's extraction program required coding in Python language. Since I lacked prior knowledge in Python coding, I spent three months learning Python coding techniques through reading data science forums on *Kaggle*, watching university lectures on *YouTube*, and discussing Twitter coding possibilities with Professor Crystal Hall. In addition to learning about tweet extraction coding, I used the same resources to learn natural language processing and sentiment analysis. I used natural language processing and sentiment analysis to perform the quantitative analysis on my dataset. While developing my Python code to extract the tweets through my Twitter Developer account, the presence of "fake news" and concerning tweets from former President Donald Trump led to a series of abnormal Twitter updates that constantly required me to change my coding. My coding attempted to collect the tweet text, number of likes, number of retweets, and replies to the original tweet. I decided to limit the tweet

collection dataset to the 5 years from 2015-2020 because the large number of extracted tweets from the timeframe provided enough data for my analysis.

After I successfully developed a code that could extract all the necessary Twitter data in November of 2020, I waited until January of 2021 to run my code and extract the tweets for my dataset. Unfortunately, the timing of my tweet extraction process fell after the insurrection on January 6 at the Capital. While the Twitter updates included necessary changes to prevent the spread of misinformation (“Release Notes” 2021), the update also blocked a Twitter scraper plug-in that I needed for my coding. The January Twitter updates limited my tweet extraction abilities to a 2-week timeframe. Since my research required the collection of a 5-year tweet dataset, I switched from developing my own code to free programs that could extract tweets.

I combined the advance search capabilities of Twitter and the data extraction program of Octoparse 8.1 Beta Version. Octoparse collected tweets in exactly the same manner as my original coding and the program managed to extract tweets from a 5-year timeframe despite the new Twitter updates. Since the research focuses on #PrisonAbolition tweets made by American users from 2015 to 2020, I used the Twitter advanced search option to limit the range of tweets to English only and divide the years by separating each year from the dates January 1st to December 31st. The advanced search option resulted in an infinite scrolling page in which the screen shows every tweet filtered from the search. After filtering the tweets, a workflow made from Octoparse created the datasets by extracting the tweet text, number of likes, replies, retweets, and the tweet’s date. The Octoparse workflow also filtered out “duplicates” of tweets that commonly show up on the Twitter timeline due to bot activity. The corpus of all tweets published under #PrisonAbolition from January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2020 created a dataset

in which quantitative and qualitative analyses illustrated the anomalous nature of the hashtag during 2020.

The quantitative data analysis consists of sentiment analysis from Microsoft Azure Machine Learning. Sentiment analysis uses natural language processing to decipher the attitude of a text as either negative, neutral, or positive. Machine learning algorithms work with natural language processing to automatically interpret human language. For example, natural language processing “works behind the scenes to enhance tools we use every day, like chatbots, spell-checkers, or language translators... [and] can help you classify social media posts by sentiment” (Roldos 2020). For this research, the natural language processing of sentiment analysis functions to classify the sentiment polarity of social media posts on Twitter. Microsoft Azure Machine Learning provides a simplistic yet effective program to perform sentiment analysis because of their cloud-based software that benefits the user with “the delivery of computing services—including servers, storage, databases, networking, software, analytics, and intelligence—over the Internet” (“What is cloud computing?” n.d). Since the research analyzes the sentiment of tweets that commonly contain elements of satire, irony, and Internet slang, the existing datasets for sentiment analysis from Microsoft Azure Machine Learning’s cloud system reduces the possibility of an inaccurate sentiment analysis. The Azure program contains stored sentiment datasets ranging from customer service to social media posts. Existing sentiment analysis of tweets through Azure’s programming proves that the program understands the attitudes behind tweets. In a similar research project, Obeta conducted a sentiment analysis following George Floyd’s funeral and found that the Azure program accurately labeled the sentiments of their 200-tweet dataset (Obeta 2020). From Obeta’s example, the sentiment analysis of their dataset

reaffirms the legitimacy of Azure’s capability to accurately conduct a sentiment analysis on Twitter content.

However, limitations and issues do exist with natural language processing and sentiment analysis. Due to the binary nature of the sentiment analysis—negative (0) to positive (1)—the data analysis misses nuanced perspectives that may provide better insight to the attitudes regarding #PrisonAbolition. While the Azure program contains the natural language processing knowledge to classify tweets, the binary nature of sentiment analysis limits the scope of the research to focus only on surface level attitudes rather than analyzing the messaging and intentions of the Twitter users. Therefore, pairing the quantitative aspect of the sentiment analysis with qualitative aspects of text analysis provides a better understanding of the #PrisonAbolition tweets. The qualitative analyses consist of Voyant Tools’ text analysis software and commentary on the specific tweets created in 2020. Voyant Tools visualizes corpuses for the digital humanities and “is designed to facilitate reading and interpretative practices” (“About” n.d). For the analysis of #PrisonAbolition, Voyant Tools reveals the phrases or words most associated with the hashtag and helps understand the atmosphere of #PrisonAbolition based on the year. Table 2 presents the words filtered out from the dataset to ensure that nonessential words in the qualitative analysis would not overshadow significant phrases. I selected words listed in Table 2 to filter out nonessential tweets. This process, though Voyant Tools, cleaned my tweet dataset by taking out tweets that only advertised events and did not bring unique perspectives to the #PrisonAbolition conversation. Voyant Tools cleans datasets by using stop words, which mainly consisted of the dates, website address, advertisements, replies, and usernames of tweets. This simplifies the process of cleaning tweets because the text analysis can focus on unique phrases after filtering out the stop words. In the original dataset, 2015 contained

1606 tweets, 2016 contained 1466 tweets, 2017 contained 1731 tweets, 2018 contained 2077 tweets, 2019 contained 2259 tweets, and 2020 contained 5037 tweets. After filtering out the tweets, it significantly reduced the number of tweets for the #PrisonAbolition dataset as it only left opinion/perspective tweets published by American Twitter users.

Voyant Tools Stop Words								
Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep
Oct	Nov	Dec	http	https	Fb.me	Ow.ly	Bit.ly	Instagram.com
Facebook.com	Twitter.com	Event	Events	Replying	Unique usernames			

Table 2 - Stop words used to eliminate unnecessary phrases from the data analysis process. Stop words were based on the date, website address, advertisements, replies without content, and usernames of Twitter users.

The other qualitative analysis aligns with Blevins’s (2019) research, “Tweeting for social justice in #Ferguson: Affective discourse in Twitter hashtags.” In their research, they focus on the evolution of hashtags from proper names and places to more story/narrative based hashtags—from #MikeBrown and #Ferguson to #IfIWasGunnedDown and #DONTSHOOT—to understand how hashtags “deepen our understanding of the affective scope of Twitter discourse as indication of why particular hashtags and schemas resonated with social media users” (Blevins, Lee, McCabe, and Edgerton 2019). Blevins’s research found that personal stories of tweet content entered mainstream news and garnered attention from the Twittersphere. While the research on #PrisonAbolition does not focus on the reach and scope of the hashtag as Blevins’ research does, the analysis draws on Blevins’ research by examining changes in the use of the hashtag based on the messaging of the tweets. Furthermore, the research examines the Twittersphere through Kosnik and Feldman’s argument that

“the importance of hashtags on social networks foregrounds the stickiness of axes of difference—of sorting and filtering and assigning types—as methods of perceiving and understanding humanity in an era that many call a post-racial, postfeminist, post-gay rights, and global.” (De Kosnik and Feldman 2019)

Kosnik and Feldman argue that Twitter provides users a space to combat the narratives of mainstream media, which offers insight into how tweets can enter political discourse. Relating to #PrisonAbolition, Kosnik and Feldman equates the significance of tweets to news media and promotes the notion that the analysis of Twitter discourse can provide understanding to politics and social movements.

The analysis of #PrisonAbolition consists of a layering of quantitative and qualitative analyses to illustrate the importance of 2020 as a unique year for the hashtag and to understand how tweets provide insight to the potential growth of a social movement. In an attempt to maintain objective in the tweet sample chosen for the qualitative analysis, I used the data from the sentiment analysis to choose tweets based on the positive (1) or negative (0) value and tweets based on the number of engagements on Twitter.

#PrisonAbolition Over Time

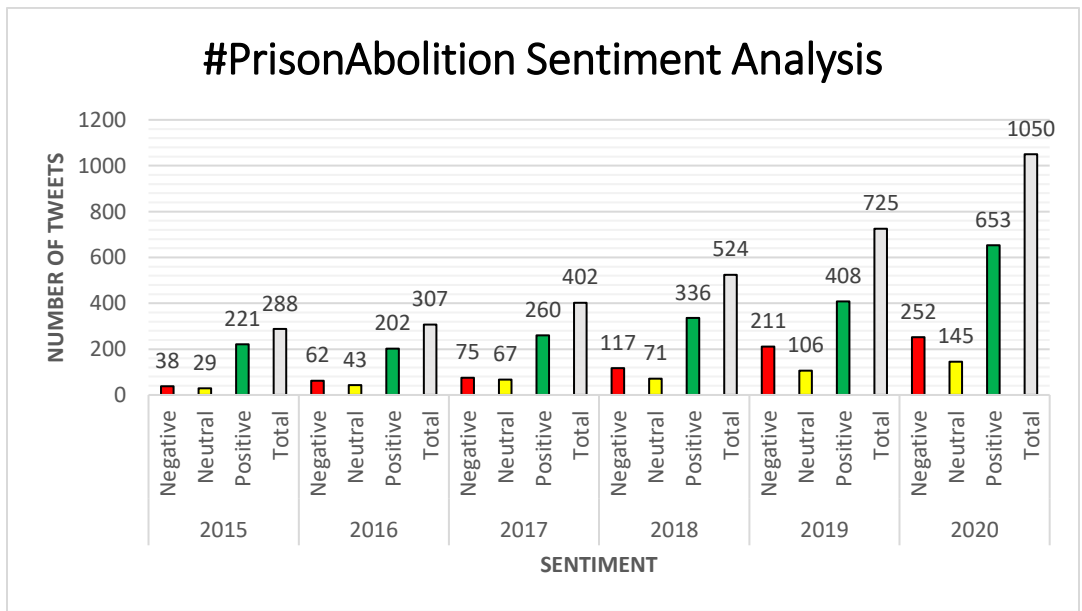


Figure 3 - Sentiment Analysis totals for #PrisonAbolition from 2015-2020. The data analysis was developed from the sentiment analysis tool from Azure Machine Learning from Excel.

From 2015 to 2020, the quantitative data demonstrate the growing engagement with the #PrisonAbolition among American Twitter users as the number of tweets increase from 288 in 2015 to 1050 in 2020. Figure 3 combines the sentiment analysis data with the number of tweets associated with #PrisonAbolition. Also, Figure 3 only displays the number of tweets after the cleaning process during the procedure of creating the dataset. Through the sentiment analysis data, natural language processing divides tweets into categories based on scores ranging from 0 to 1. Scores closer to the 0 value classify as negative sentiment while scores closer to the 1 value classify as positive sentiment. Over the course of 6 years, the negative and positive sentiment valued tweets both increased as the engagement with the hashtag grew. The sentiment analysis data provide a foundation for the qualitative tweet analysis as the tweets picked for analysis will consist of the lowest negative sentiment value tweet, highest positive sentiment value tweet, and most engaged tweet.

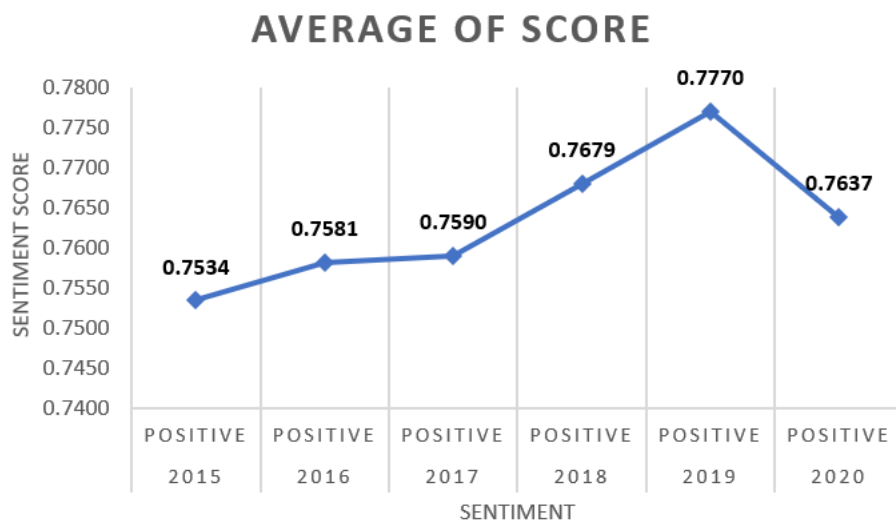


Figure 4 - Average scores of the positive sentiment tweets from 2015-2020.

As Figure 3 illustrates the consistency between 2015-2019 and the anomalous nature of 2020, Figure 4 adds to the hypothesis as the upward trend of positive sentiment tweets from

2015-2019 abruptly shoots down at 2020. The downward shift of the 2020 dataset from the consistent upward growth of the 2015-2019 datasets indicates a potential shift in attitudes regarding #PrisonAbolition. With the information of Table 3 that #PrisonAbolition became included in conversations with “Defund the Police,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “COVID19,” the association with these existing social movements influenced the attitudes of #PrisonAbolition. Due to the sentiment and content differences between the 2015-2019 and 2020 datasets, the analysis of the 2020 dataset will reveal any changes in #PrisonAbolition Twitter discourse.

Top 8 Terms Under #PrisonAbolition								
Year	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Term 5	Term 6	Term 7	Term 8
2015	Prison(s)	Abolition	Justice	Reform	Prison Reform	New(s)	Action	Criminal
2016	Prison(s)	Abolition	Justice	Prison Strike	New(s)	Prisoners	Work	Reform
2017	Prison(s)	Abolition	People	Police	New(s)	Justice	Black	NYC
2018	Prison(s)	Abolition	People	Justice	Prison Reform	New(s)	Prisoners	End
2019	Prison(s)	Abolition	Justice	People	Just	Ruth	Wilson	Work
2020	Prison(s)	Abolition	People	Justice	Defund the Police	Black Lives Matter	CJR Reform	COVID19

Table 3 - Voyant Tools most common phrases text analysis for the top 8 terms under #PrisonAbolition.

Shifting to the qualitative analysis that clearly divides 2020 from the 2015-2019 dataset, the content of #PrisonAbolition tweets in 2020 include more rhetoric related to social movements and American injustices. As Table 3 presents, the dataset remains consistent between 2015-2019 as the associated phrases to #PrisonAbolition focus on the prison system as an independent social movement. Contrastingly, the 2020 dataset offers more unique phrase associations that relate to other social movements. The social movements—Defund the Police, Black Lives Matter, Criminal Justice Reform (CJR)—adopts the #PrisonAbolition movement as a necessary component to social activism against state sanctioned violence. The action of Black Lives Matter co-opting the prison abolition movement demonstrates an upward scale shift that Tilly defines as an event that “moves contention beyond its local origins, touches the interests

and values of new actors, involves a shift in venue to sites where contention may be more or less successful and can threaten other actors” (Tilly and Tarrow 2006, 125). As the *Pew Research Center* reports, #BlackLivesMatter peaked with 8.8 million users on May 28, 2020 (Anderson, Barthel, Perrin, and Vogels 2020). With heightened attention focused on Black Lives Matter, police brutality, and the injustices of the American political system, #BlackLivesMatter also worked as a gateway to more radical social movements. Stemming from #BlackLivesMatter, other hashtags arose such as #acab, #defundthepolice, #PrisonAbolition. Although movements to defund the police and abolish prisons existed within the knowledge of abolitionist scholars, the hashtagging of these movements on Twitter made them more accessible to a broader audience. Based on the success of Black Lives Matter in expanding their social base across the US and internationally, the arising social movements from Black Lives Matter could experience similar successes in getting more support.

The shift of the prison abolition movement existing as an independent movement to one existing within the larger agenda of the Black Lives Matter Movement puts the prison abolition agenda in the forefront of people’s minds. With the distinction between associated phrases between 2020 and 2015-2019, the analysis on the attitude behind the tweets reveal that 2020 increased the #PrisonAbolition visibility and attracted a multitude of perspectives.

The Differing Perspectives of Tweets Under #PrisonAbolition

“Just because I’m all about #PrisonAbolition doesn’t mean that I don’t think that this is a trash taker. It’s one thing to be like, “I don’t think he should go to prison because I don’t want to legitimize the PIC,” but we know DAMN well that that’s not what THIS is.”

—@writersdelite Nov 8, 2020

Listed as the lowest negative sentiment value at 9.52E-05, the content of @writersdelite’s tweet provides a complex take on the main issue of prison abolition—how does prison abolition deal with the “real offenders.” In @writersdelite’s tweet they explain that prison abolition exists in cases where the prison industrial complex exploits and oppresses minority communities, but they do not support prison abolition in cases where the offender commits an egregious crime. Gilmore confronts a similar situation in her conversation with middle schoolers who questioned the purpose of prison abolitionism by asking, ““but what about the people who do something wrong?”” (Kushner 2019). In response to the critique raised by @writersdelite’s tweet and that of the middle schoolers, Gilmore contends that prison abolition exists as “both a long -term goal and practical policy program, calling for government investment in jobs, education, housing, health care—all the elements that are required for a productive and violence-free life” (Kushner 2019). While Gilmore offers a convincing reason to support prison abolition in the long-run for future peace, the prison abolition movement faces current issues about conditional versus unconditional supporters. Unconditional supporters commit to the values and actions of prison abolition regardless of the scenario, whereas conditional supports act similar to @writersdelite as they both value prison abolition but support the continuation of prisons for individuals they deem unfit for civil life.

@writersdelite presents an obvious dilemma for the prison abolition movement because their conditional support of the movement indicates that the values of prison abolition may not appeal to a more moderate audience. The complete dismantling of prisons, along with other carceral institutions, demonstrates a radical approach to the injustices existing in America. While prison abolitionists view abolition as a necessary step to end state-controlled violence and oppression, much of the population lies within the range of more moderate beliefs. The *Gallup*

Poll reports that “36%, on average, [identify] as conservative, 35% as moderate and 25% as liberal” (Saad 2021). With conflicting views toward the radical values of prison abolition, the movement faces the issue of demobilization. If supporters of prison abolition continue to show hesitancy in embracing all the values and initiatives of abolition, the movement may experience de-escalation, which Tilly explains as “the substitution of more extreme goals and more robust tactics for more moderate ones in order to maintain the interest of their supports and attract new ones” (Tilly and Tarrow 2006, 130). While the prison abolition movement does not display interest in taking more moderate approaches, the movement’s progress could confront risks of stagnation due to a nonexpanding support base.

“I wrote a thing! #PrisonAbolition”

—@kewtoday Dec 22, 2020

“I have consistently said over and over again, our police forces are valued in our communities. Sadly, they are under funded by the governments. While I argue for #PrisonAbolition, I know many of our communities are not there and their forces provide some essential help.”

—@kewtoday Jul 13, 2020

In @kewtoday’s tweets, they hold two significant positions in the #PrisonAbolition Twitter discourse—most engaged tweet and containing a low negative sentiment value of 0.02433593. @kewtoday’s most engaged tweet, “I wrote a thing!” attracted 366 likes, 62 retweets, and 10 comments congratulating their achievement. In the post, @kewtoday includes a book titled *Neo-Colonial Injustice and the Mass Imprisonment of Indigenous Women* with a picture of her published chapter “The Relationship Between Restorative Justice and Prison Abolition.” Labeled under #PrisonAbolition, @kewtoday’s tweet demonstrates an academic’s

involvement in the Twitter discourse and the popularity and reach of their abolitionist work. In the sentiment analysis, @kewtoday's tweet scores a positive sentiment value of 0.659829676.

While the contrasting sentiment values of @kewtoday's tweets points out obvious difference in the attitude behind the messaging, the content of the tweets presents contradictory views on the abolition movement. As Table 3 indicates with the associated phrases to #PrisonAbolition, the movement aligns with other abolitionists movements such as "Defund the Police." However, @kewtoday's low negative sentiment value tweet indicates a diverging position from the rest of the abolitionist movement as they express their support for the police force. By explaining that communities value the police and that the police forces lack federal funding, @kewtoday differs from the "Defund the Police" movement and creates conflicting stances regarding the carceral state. The "Defund the Police" movement "exists as a suite of public police ideas premised on investments in individual well-being, community infrastructure, alternative first responder services, and divestment from the use of lethal force" (Coleman 2020). The defund movement argues that the excessive federal funding of police department decreases overall funding for essential welfare program. As @kewtoday's claim that the funding currently undervalues police, their tweet contradicts the essence of the defund movement. Based on the content of @kewtoday's tweet, their values align closer to the reform-minded individuals who believe that investing in reform and training legitimizes the role of police in communities.

@kewtoday's involvement in #PrisonAbolition discourse as an academic who is publishing works on prison abolition while also maintaining a position in support of police demonstrates liberal-progressive reformism in action. Since abolitionism actively works to dismantle carceral institutions and favors "absolutely getting rid of the systems and tools that support oppression, punishment and marginalization of people" (Woodward 2020), aligning in a

position that supports the existence on one aspect of the carceral state delegitimizes their role as an abolitionist.

“roses are red—violets are blue—I want free all the prisoners—and so should you #PrisonAbolition #EndTorture”

—@pigasuak May 7, 2020

Another positive sentiment tweet values at 0.62754494 illustrates a lighthearted take on the #PrisonAbolition discourse. @pigasuak’s tweet uses the #PrisonAbolition on a tweet places less of a significant value on inspiring action or criticizing the prison system that other tweets under the hashtag make. Instead, this whimsical approach to attracting potential supporters demonstrates the sect of Twitter posts that serve purely for entertainment. With 4 likes and 2 retweets, @pigasuak most likely created the tweet for their 1,469 followers. Many Twitter users contain less than 500 followers and use the social media network only for recreation. Based on Twitter’s demographic consisting of 32% of 13-17 year olds, 38% 18-29 year olds, and 26% of 30-49 year olds (Chen 2020), the behavior of Twitter users to only focus on entertainment aligns with the demographic that makes up the majority of the site. Although @pigasuak’s tweet seems to match the behavior of recreational Twitter users, the context of the tweet demonstrates the pervasiveness of social movements in everyday life. By using #PrisonAbolition, @pigasuak becomes included in the Twitter discourse and engaged with the movement themselves. The freedom of hashtags and Twitter’s open communication network enables interactions such as @pigasuak’s to continue, which benefits social movements as they attempt to attract more supporters.

“Reminder that the fight has come before, the fight is happening now, and the fight will be forever. ❤️ #acab #prisonabolition #pnw”

—@WhimsyWombat Jun 13, 2020

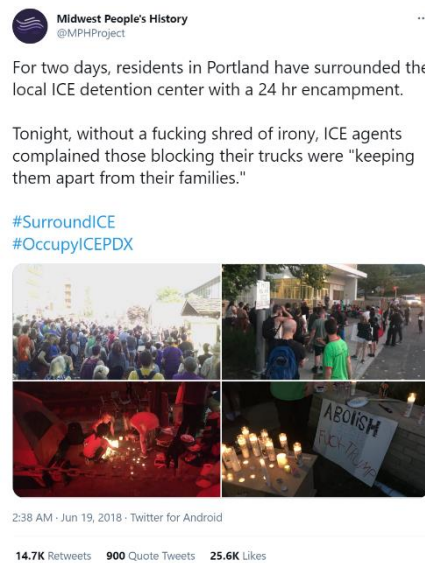


Figure 5 - Midwest People's History tweet that was quote tweeted by @WhimsyWombat

@WhimsyWombat’s tweet holds significance in the #PrisonAbolition discourse due to the tweet attracting the most engagement despite @WhimsyWombat not existing as a verified Twitter user or as an organization. At the time of writing, the user account @WhimsyWombat contains less than 500 followers yet effectively created a quote tweet that garnered 190 likes and 84 retweets. @WhimsyWombat’s quote tweet reacts to the Midwest People’s History’s tweet about the residents of Portland, Oregon surrounding a local ICE detention center and demanding the abolishing of the federal agency. In @WhimsyWombat’s case, their tweet captures the many targets of the contemporary abolition movement—ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards), Prison Abolition, and Abolish ICE. Furthermore, the tweet’s rhetoric which calls the audience to continue fighting demonstrates @WhimsyWombat’s attempt to inspire protest mobilization. Professor Valerie Bunce explains that for protest mobilization, “nothing gets people into the

streets faster than shared isolation, agreement on a common enemy, and shocks that are sudden and similar” (Bunce 1999, 29). Demonstrated through the Black Lives Matter protests that appeared in about 140 US cities and required the presence of the National Guard in about 21 states, the shared isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and frustration with the police force and Trump administration led to nation-wide protest mobilization (Taylor 2021). Since @WhimsyWombat quote tweets an existing tweet depicting an active protest with a message of support and call for continued action, their tweet contributes to the #PrisonAbolition discourse by fueling the energy of abolitionists to continue with their protest mobilization. Given the tweet’s high engagement, the other Twitter users’ interaction with the tweet signals an agreement and an attempt to influence their own followers to listen to @WhimsyWombat’s message. The 84 retweets signify the spreading of the original tweet to the other follower bases of the Twitter users who retweeted the content. While the high engagement of @WhimsyWombat’s tweet presents an optimistic message that Twitter users who engaged with the tweet would support protest mobilization, the current decline of social movement protests in 2021 raises the concern about the longevity of active participation.

“The prison system is using #COVID-19 as an excuse to torture incarcerated people with solitary confinement instead of exploring decarceration. 14 days of solitary confinement is inexcusable. #prisonabolition #decarceration”

—@JessStohlmann Mar 31, 2020

Another aspect of the #PrisonAbolition discourse in 2020 involved the COVID-19 pandemic that exposed the flaws within American political, economic, and social institutions. @JessStohlmann’s tweet connects to the COVID-19 pandemic as a justification to end incarceration by humanizing incarcerated individuals. The association of COVID-19 to #PrisonAbolition, depicted in Table 3, demonstrates the association of the pandemic to social

movements. The clustering of phrases such as “Defund the Police, Black Lives Matter, Justice, Abolition, and COVID19” illustrates the unique quality of 2020 as Americans started to engage in social movements that disrupt the status quo. @JessStohlmann’s tweet contributes to the #PrisonAbolition discourse by providing an example of how the COVID-19 virus exposes the inadequacies of the American prison system. Twitter users’ engagement with the prison abolition movement partly results from the raising awareness of the conditions in prisons. As videos and posts on Twitter the attention of American people, support for the movement increases.

@JessStohlmann’s tweet expresses discontent of the current conditions of prisons from an outsider’s perspective. Within the Twittersphere, the benefit of anonymity and the ability to broadcast to large audiences helps individuals who attempt to bring awareness to a personal or social issue. The Twitter user @RailroadUnderg1 demonstrates the usefulness of Twitter for social movements. For example, @RailroadUnderg1’s personal bio— “Freedom fighter. Incarcerated human being reporting from inside of a prison with a contraband cellphone. Trapped in a petri dish.” @RailroadUnderg1’s confession of their status as an incarcerated individual with a contraband cellphone positions the Twitter user as an insider within a flawed oppressive institution. Actively advocating for the dismantling of the carceral state and exposing the inhuman conditions of the prison system, @RailroadUnderg1’s tweets reach their 35.7k followers daily. @RailroadUnderg1’s last recorded tweet attracted 12.7k likes, 1.1k retweets, and 190 replies on February 12th:

“This will be the last time I tweet in a while. They have been searching more & more lately. Its more dangerous than ever to have a phone here. So I have to give this phone away. I want to thank everyone who has been following me the past year and amplifying my voice.”

—@RailroadUnderg1 Feb 12, 2021

Without @RailroadUnderg1, other Twitter users lose the perspective of tweets such as these:

“Remorse, Accountability, Reparations. These words were never uttered when I was being sentenced to prison. Because these words were not & still aren't a priority in our Justice System. The absence of those words says Survivors of Crime are not a priority in our 'Justice' system.”

—@RailroadUnderg1 Dec 29, 2020

“2020 brought to light so much of the darkness & cruelty of our Criminal Justice System. To all the organizers & dissenters, let's tear this system down in 2021. See you there.”

—@RailroadUnderg1 Dec 27, 2020

“Been reading Angela Y. Davis this morning. She reminds me how much I don't know. Also how important it is we continue to educate ourselves about our struggle for Equality & Justice. Pick up a book this week folks!”

—@RailroadUnderg1 Dec 21, 2020

From @RailroadUnderg1's beginning in April 2020 to their end in February 2021, their account posted 1,255 tweets, all of which focused on prison abolition and exposing the American prison system. Communication with individuals experiencing the oppression of state violence first hand helps facilitate an exchange of beliefs that may benefit the prison abolition movement. As @JessStohlmann's tweet indicates, average Twitter users can effectively become followers of certain social movements based on their exposure to other Twitter users with differing yet engaging perspectives.

Conclusion

Although the co-opting of #PrisonAbolition under popular hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #DefundThePolice signals a growing popularity of the prison abolition

movement, the direction of the prison abolition movement on Twitter remains unclear due to the lack of cohesion in understanding abolitionist values. From the text analysis of the tweet corpus, the Twitter users engaged with #PrisonAbolition ranged from published academics, activists, currently incarcerated individuals, and everyday Americans. The assessment of these tweets underscores the virality of a hashtag as the number of #PrisonAbolition tweets increase from 2015 to 2020; however, the presence of countering perspectives that contradict the prison abolition movement signal a potential concern of Twitter users misunderstanding the arguments made by the prison abolition movement. Since Twitter provides a landscape for a multitude of perspectives to exist, the growing use of #PrisonAbolition for upcoming years could shift toward embracing the radical abolitionist values. Even though American Twitter users demonstrated through this selection of tweets do not fully embrace abolitionist concepts, their suspicion of US carceral institutions as they continue to enact racial and political violence illustrates a promising development as American Twitter users begin to critique the somewhat normalized carceral networks that surround them.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“Abolition is a theory of change, it’s a theory of social life. It’s about making things.”

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 2018

Prior to beginning this research, I existed in a Twitter echo chamber occupied by the voices of progressive democrats, liberal news channels, and young college activists. Black Lives Matter protests that dominated social media and news during 2020 illustrated the ability of young Americans to mobilize under a common cause to challenge injustice and protect the lives of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and People of Color. Inspired by the collective action of protesting political violence and previous knowledge of the “Twitter Revolutions” in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Moldova, I embarked on a journey to explore whether the recently popular #PrisonAbolition would develop into a larger social movement that would effectively attack one of the oldest and seemingly impenetrable US carceral institutions. However, as the research concludes, the conflicting arguments under the #PrisonAbolition tweets illustrate that the prison abolition movement does not currently possess a unified social base. The data on #PrisonAbolition show that American Twitter users engage in conversation about prison abolition through #PrisonAbolition but hold some hesitation in fully embracing the idea of a future without prisons. The reluctant tweets that aim closer to liberal-progressive reformism than abolitionism demonstrate how the US’ infrastructural power effectively coerced the majority population into consenting to the development of carceral networks for the US to practice methods of dominance. Based on the lack of radical viewpoints among the tweets of #PrisonAbolition, the results of the research reveal the current limitations to the prison abolition movement and, also, point to potential arenas where the movement benefits from abolition related hashtags on Twitter.

Limitations of Prison Abolition

The results of #PrisonAbolition analysis in 2020 reveal the weaknesses of the movement that prevented its transition from Twitter activism to on the ground mobilization. When comparing the expectations for the prison abolition movement to the development of mass protests observed in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Moldova’s “Twitter Revolutions,” it highlights key differences as to why the prison abolition movement failed to show signs of social mobilization—level of cohesion within the social base and personal investment to the movement.

Apparent in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, a strong opposition against President Mubarak’s regime created a unified social base. The opposition remained in solidarity about their concerns of “the deteriorating political and economic conditions that affected everyday lives, constricted their freedoms, rampant corruption, and a country that had turned into a police state” (Abul-Fottouh 2018, 224). Evident through the size of the opposition that “included activists of various ideological backgrounds, mainly comprising of liberals, socialists, and Islamists” (Abul-Fottouh 2018, 224), the revolution successfully resulted in mass mobilization because most protestors agreed on a common set of values that challenged the Mubarak regime. Furthermore, the opposition held high levels of personal investment in the movement because the Egyptian government’s repression penetrated all levels of civil society for Egyptian citizens. With common goals to fight for and a large social base with high levels of personal investment, the Twitter activism effectively transitioned to on the ground mobilization.

In contrast to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the prison abolition discourse on Twitter demonstrates a lack of cohesion in the social base and low to rare levels of personal investment to the movement. The conflicting viewpoints between prison abolitionists and liberal-progressive reformists who insert themselves into abolitionist discourse prove that American Twitter users

who use #PrisonAbolition do not agree on common goals. Without the benefit of collective alliances that agreement on a common set of values affords, as seen in Egypt, the activity on Twitter fails to move beyond the Internet and into real-life mass protests. The other limitation the example of Egypt highlights, level of personal investment, reveals how American Twitter users engage in conversation via hashtags without possessing personal interest in actively supporting the movement outside of Twitter. This issue draws to the trend of “slacktivism” online, where Twitter users active in liking, retweeting, and replying to published tweets about a specific social movement limit their contribution to the social movement at the social media level and fail to involve themselves in real-life activities relate to the social movement (Cook, Waigh, Abdipanah, Hashemi, and Rahman 2014). The prison abolition movement encounters the common issue of “slacktivism” shared by other social movements that derive their large population of support through social media. Unless Twitter users engaged in #PrisonAbolition experience first-hand or through connections of political violence inflicted through carceral networks, the likelihood of real-life participation remains low.

Future Implications for Abolition Movements

Although the assessments of #PrisonAbolition tweets illustrate the lack of understanding and support regarding the prison abolition movement, the quantitative and qualitative analyses performed on the tweets give insight into how the increasing number of American Twitter users joining abolitionist discourse and publishing tweets that directly critique or hint a suspicion to carceral networks potentially signal a gradual development of abolitionist thought on Twitter. This thesis contributes to the larger study of abolitionist discourse on social media by starting the discussion about the prison abolition movement on Twitter. As Arnold and Sampson argue, “tweets are ephemeral and there are no standards or best practices for their collection and

preservation” (Arnold and Sampson 2014, 510). Since the emergence of #PrisonAbolition as a social movement, connected to other viral movements such as Black Lives Matter, occurred as recent as the summer of 2020, preserving the tweets involved in the beginning process of the prison abolitionist discourse on Twitter helps in future research on abolitionist discourse and beginnings on Twitter. Demonstrated in research assessments on “Twitter Revolutions” (Rahaghi 2012, Arnold and Sampson 2014, Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009), collecting, archiving, and analyzing the initial stages of Twitter social movement hashtags helps in understanding potentially future events of on the ground mobilization that began from social networks created through social media. For example, the death penalty abolition movement began in the 1900s, but began to gain traction once the movement entered legal arenas and broadened their support network through social media and film propaganda. As the prison abolition movement just began to enter an arena outside of academia, its residence in a platform such as Twitter could gradually boost the movement in decades to come.

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