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### Practicing Abolition: A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy

Samantha Lilienfeld

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PRACTICING ABOLITION:  
A DIGITAL ROUNDTABLE ON ABOLITIONIST PEDAGOGY

by

SAMANTHA LILIENFELD

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,  
The City University of New York

2022

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Practicing Abolition:  
A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy

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Samantha Lilienfeld

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal  
Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts.

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Date

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Justin Rogers-Cooper

Capstone Project Advisor

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## ABSTRACT

Practicing Abolition: A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy

by

Samantha Lilienfeld

Advisor: Justin Rogers-Cooper

This capstone project explores education and pedagogy as sites for abolitionist practice, and approaches abolitionism as a method by building on the idea of abolition democracy. Using the framework of abolition as a pedagogical practice, I see teaching and learning as urgent tasks of contemporary abolitionism. My project integrates research and scholarship on the abolition of prisons and policing with practices of pedagogy, in part by thinking interdisciplinarily with students and scholars working within CUNY. *Practicing Abolition: A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy* incorporates voices from students and scholars about how they practice abolitionist pedagogy in higher education by presenting a conversation as an asynchronous digital roundtable on abolitionist pedagogy published on CUNY Commons. The roundtable was conducted through asynchronous conversations, then arranged and organized by presenting guiding questions and corresponding discussion. The website features a written and auditory collection of these conversations, a glossary of key terminology, and the scholarship cited during the roundtable. By utilizing existing theoretical research, including the field of radical pedagogy, my capstone explores the contradictions that arise from incorporating abolitionist pedagogies into institutions of higher education. This project takes up abolition in application to institutions outside of prisons,

but still affected by them, in the belief that abolition is an ongoing practice, and to broaden the potential and scope of abolition democracy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my capstone advisor, Justin Rogers-Cooper, for his dedication, thoughtfulness, and intellectual guidance throughout this project. My first graduate course as his student reignited my interest to return to higher education and apply to the MALS program. I am fortunate for his support throughout my time at CUNY Graduate Center.

I am extremely grateful to Josefine Ziebell for her continuous encouragement and enthusiasm. Her unwavering support, ranging from technical to emotional, was integral to this project and demonstrated the values of collaboration and care in scholarly work.

And a special thank you to Lucien Baskin, Nicole Haiber, Andrea Morrell, and Karen Zaino who made this project possible with their generosity and intellectual contributions. My conversations with each of them brought structure and joy to this capstone.

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## DIGITAL MANIFEST

I. White Paper (PDF)

II. Project Website

<https://malscapstone.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>

III. WARC File

Archived version of the project website.

## A NOTE ON TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The communications software Zoom was used to host and record the asynchronous conversations with the participants. Zoom is a video and audio conferencing platform available through a subscription. I used QuickTime Player, a free multimedia software to trim the full conversations into separate answers. I created the website through CUNY Commons, an open-source teaching and social network platform for CUNY affiliates.

## Project Narrative

Through taking courses in the interdisciplinary field of American Studies within the Liberal Studies program, I studied a variety of topics in my coursework. I found myself, however, searching for abolition throughout my research. One of my first assignments for the MALS program, in one of my core American Studies courses, was to write a new keyword in the style of the *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* project.<sup>1</sup> I was fascinated with the distinction between punishment and accountability, as illuminated by abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba, and I chose to write about accountability as my keyword. Kaba is a transformative justice (TJ) practitioner who describes the process of TJ as a practice of abolition. One of Kaba's many strengths is the ability to communicate complex ideas into clear and accessible language; this is one reason why she is a leading voice of the contemporary abolitionist movement. Using her insights, I wanted to analyze how institutional claims to "accountability" distort our notion of justice, responsibility, and consequences, and in particular, to challenge the idea that law and order provide accountability. The socio-cultural dependency towards carceral punishment in response to any and all forms of harm are shaped by centuries of U.S. political economy. Instead of relying on incarceration, transformative justice is an alternative attempt to address interpersonal violence without institutional interference. Practiced outside of the criminal justice system, transformative justice is critical of the conditions and systems of oppression that led to the harm. Here, Kaba offers a vision of abolition that does not wait for "scorched earth," as her contemporary Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes.<sup>2</sup> Transformative

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<sup>1</sup> "American Cultural Studies," *Keywords*, March 19, 2015, <https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Prisons and Class Warfare: An Interview with Ruth Wilson Gilmore," *Verso Books* (blog), August 2, 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3954-prisons-and-class-warfare-an-interview-with-ruth-wilson-gilmore>.

justice and community accountability activists seek to not only repair any affected relationships, but also to transform the conditions that led to violence. These approaches name institutions of policing as both sites of violence and an outcome of violent systems.<sup>3</sup>

The abolitionist practices implemented by Kaba and her peers present the connection between the contemporary abolitionist movement and its historical beginnings. From this early research, I found that to acknowledge the origins of global capitalism and U.S. enslavement is to acknowledge the prison-industrial complex, and importantly, the conditions of violence that prisons sustain.<sup>4</sup> While the historical significance of abolition is grounded in the eradication of chattel slavery, that significance extends to the unfinished project of abolition democracy. W.E.B. DuBois' configuration of abolition democracy in *Black Reconstruction* (1935) during the era of post-Emancipation supplied a framework for contemporary iterations of abolition, including the prison-industrial-complex (PIC). Abolition democracy can be applied to more than just Reconstruction or the PIC, and in fact to all institutions and political economies that operate under the same carceral logic of racial capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Du Bois and Angela Davis also assert that the destruction of institutions does not offer a new set of relations, logics, or technologies without the creation of new institutions and political and social relations.<sup>6</sup> A comprehensive abolition is simultaneously dismantling institutions and creating new institutions of democracy:

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Hayes, "Why Is This Happening? The Chris Hayes Podcast: Abolishing Prisons with Mariame Kaba," accessed March 19, 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/abolishing-prisons-with-mariame-kaba/id1382983397?i=1000457157242>.

<sup>4</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1999); David Eng, "The Civil and the Human," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2012): 205–12, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2012.0015>; LaRose Parris, *Being Apart: Theoretical and Existential Resistance in Africana Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Jodi Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism," *Social Text* 24, no. 4 (89) (December 1, 2006): 1–24; Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*.

it is a new presence and practice, according to Gilmore.<sup>7</sup> In thinking through the origins of modern abolitionist movements rooted in the emancipation of enslaved peoples, it is necessary to examine the congruency of slavery with capitalism, colonialism, and racism. Under this framework, abolition extends beyond the PIC, and requires a cultural shift that transforms society and culture on various scales, from community dynamics to new institutions. The active rethinking of accountability in non-punitive ways, like transformative justice and community accountability, reveals that abolition itself is a set of new practices.

This coursework revealed that while abolitionist scholarship prominently studies prison and policing, and prior to that, enslavement and emancipation, Du Bois saw education and schools as key institutions for abolition democracy.<sup>8</sup> In this project, I look at education and pedagogy as sites for potential abolitionist practice, and as discussed in later sections, I talk to other scholars in the CUNY system in order to learn more about what that means for abolitionist scholarship. The remaking of institutions and invention of new practices includes the university, and therefore the university is a formal site of abolitionist study. As such, Dylan Rodriguez identifies the university and academia's historical complicity in a racial capitalist paradigm while offering them as locations of both critique and transformation. Through looking at that contradiction, Rodriguez encourages us to see the potential for the university to serve as a site of abolitionist desire and radical creativity, two concepts I explore in my capstone through the idea of abolitionist pedagogy. Rodriguez hopes for the university to become a space for innovative abolitionist thought that has historical legitimacy. In fact, the scholarship of abolition has been central to abolitionist movements and intellectual advancements for decades. The study of racial

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Making Abolition Geography in California's Central Valley with Ruth Wilson Gilmore," *The Funambulist Magazine*, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://thefunambulist.net/making-abolition-geography-in-californias-central-valley-with-ruth-wilson-gilmore>.

<sup>8</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*.

capitalism is central to the field of American Studies, for example, and the intellectual genealogy of abolition as an “antagonistic contradiction” to racial capitalism reveals that applying an abolitionist lens is key to further research in the field.<sup>9</sup> Davis and Gilmore’s substantial organizing credentials outside the academy, among others such as Joy James, reveals too that abolitionist scholarship is not limited to educational institutions.

The pursuit of projects of abolition democracy, and the presence of abolitionist practices that confront carceral formations, are integral to the contemporary abolitionist movement. Gilmore maintains that this process of abolition democracy is not just an introductory step to abolition: it is a practice of abolition. She clarifies, “abolition is a theory of change, it's a theory of social life. It's about making things.”<sup>10</sup> Gilmore argues that this synchronous practice of building and destruction allows support from existing institutions in the process of abolition. My interdisciplinary approach in MALS and American Studies has revealed that the study and practice of abolition has existed in, out, and through academia for decades. I have found that the adaptability of the abolitionist genealogy extends its legitimacy as a necessary presence of abolition in general.

I searched for this ethos of practicing abolition in, around, and in spite of institutional constraints in my coursework. In the fall of 2020, Gilmore and Kaba united for an online CUNY event to discuss their vision of “A World Without Prisons.”<sup>11</sup> I was excited by the event, and it served as a basis for an event review assignment for my Seminar in Interdisciplinary Studies. In the broadcasted discussion, Kaba emphasized the growing popularity of abolition as a result of the 2020 uprisings against U.S. policing with caution. She asked Gilmore what is risked when

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<sup>9</sup> *CHANGE: A World Without Prisons - Ruth Wilson Gilmore in Conversation with Mariame Kaba*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeQmVpnRMYE>.

<sup>10</sup> Gilmore, “Prisons and Class Warfare.”

<sup>11</sup> *CHANGE: A World Without Prisons*.

abolition enters the mainstream, naming the reductionism and public distortion of abolitionist politics on display in the months prior. Gilmore utilized Kaba's example of false abolitionism as individualism, as something one practices alone, or which can be checked off a to-do list. On the contrary, Gilmore replied that abolition is about "becoming rather than being an abolitionist because abolition is a constant becoming."<sup>12</sup> Gilmore again underscored that abolition is not just destruction, but the making of something new. This remaking does not have to wait until everything is torn down, she added, emphasizing the DuBoisian notion of abolition democracy. Gilmore reiterated the point she made nearly three decades prior: to advocate for using the tools we currently have.<sup>13</sup> She presented an interpretation of Audre Lorde's "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," explaining that the apostrophe in "master's" is the most important part of the equation. The problem is not the tools themselves, but the establishment of the tools as property and possession of the master. Ironically, Lorde's famous essay was initially a speech presented at NYU, where we see the *master's house* could be, in some iterations, an academic institution.<sup>14</sup> Further, while an anarchic-abolitionist response may be an option, it is not the response Gilmore offers. Instead, Gilmore sees the state playing a key role. She couched this explanation in her employment by CUNY, a "working-peoples" state institution that she envisions with a larger presence, and one that contradicts organized abandonment "to enable people to live more wonderful lives."<sup>15</sup> In this vision, the tools of the university are not inherently wrong so long as their possession can be recycled and eventually reclaimed by organized people, such as the returning demand for free tuition across CUNY. In an era of

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<sup>12</sup> *CHANGE: A World Without Prisons*.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA," *Race & Class* 35, no. 1 (July 1993): 69–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639689303500107>.

<sup>14</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Reprint, revised (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> *CHANGE: A World Without Prisons*.

multicultural reforms offered in reaction to calls for transformative change, Gilmore utilizes the Graduate Center and CUNY as examples of institutions we should be emboldened to demand more from, because as Gilmore understands, they too can be sites of abolitionism.

This intervention by Gilmore left me pondering the contradictions of using an institution one seeks to ‘abolish’ in the practice of abolition, a tension I surfaced to peers and friends. The questions of abolitionist scholarship within the academy and its utility resonated outside the classroom. The following semester, I found that another CUNY professor, Matt Brim, named this resonance in his book, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University*, and his co-taught course, Equity, Elitism, and Public Higher Education. In his work and class, Brim’s conception of poor queer studies factored in students’ material reality outside of the classroom as integral to the pedagogy of queer studies and their education overall.<sup>16</sup> Brim invited students to think about who and what we teach outside of the Graduate Center building or Zoom room in order to deepen our understanding of its pedagogical value. For this course, I thought about the previous coursework I’d written, and my attempts to show their value to people outside of the program. I incorporated an intervention by the co-instructor for the course, Katina Rogers, to create more accessible and engaging mediums for knowledge sharing by reworking previous papers into digital zines.<sup>17</sup> This deconstruction of academic work allowed me to demystify theoretical concepts (for myself and the potential reader), to redirect readers to further research, and to practice transparency about struggling with certain scholarship. Ultimately, this project was an attempt to provide a prospective pedagogy to an audience outside of academia by challenging the lifespan of a course’s content and my resulting research and writing. As I will

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<sup>16</sup> Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Katina Rogers, *Putting the Humanities PhD to Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

discuss in a later section, this course’s project contained key methodologies I aimed to replicate in my capstone.

This course and project eventually led me to question how I understand my role as a scholar, not necessarily an academic, and to engage and participate in pedagogy and abolition. What does this scholarly participation look like in abolitionist practice? How can and should scholars use the university for this practice and pedagogy? I also wondered how Gilmore’s intervention elicited further questions about the use and misuse of abolitionist practices of educational institutions and the people in it and of it, namely students and academics.

An integral inquiry for my capstone project has been to think through how abolitionist pedagogy is cultivated and maintained, and how it relates to abolition democracy. As a pillar of radical pedagogy, Paulo Freire insists upon a pedagogical practice that is collaborative and “conscious,” one that he named a “problem-posing” education.<sup>18</sup> Freire’s pedagogy invokes the presence of abolition by relying on radical vision and imagination, a tenant of abolitionist pedagogy as proposed by both Rodriguez and Bettina Love.<sup>19</sup> Below, I will expand upon radical pedagogies and its connection to abolitionist pedagogy. Considering this scholarship, abolitionist pedagogy cannot solely be formulaic or standardized, as it must incorporate a collaborative method of knowledge production that naturally fluctuates within and among pedagogical sites. In rejecting abolition as an identity, and embracing it as a collective practice—a “becoming rather than being”—abolition can occur through a shared, accessible pedagogy.<sup>20</sup>

My capstone incorporates voices from other scholars about abolitionist pedagogy and the

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<sup>18</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Bettina Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); Dylan Rodriguez, “The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position,” *The Radical Teacher*, no. 88 (2010): 7–19.

<sup>20</sup> *CHANGE: A World Without Prisons*.

boundaries of higher education as a site for practicing these methodologies. I conducted asynchronous conversations with other scholars, asking them variations of a set of questions on my project's topics. These questions arose in my research and reading phase of the capstone. Many of our conversations directly referenced the scholarship central to my project, which I will explore in later sections. I then arranged and contextualized these questions and their corresponding answers on a website hosted on CUNY Commons to create a digital roundtable on abolitionist pedagogy. The site's pages feature the comprehensive written and auditory collection of these conversations, a glossary of key terminology, and scholarship cited during our discussions.

The website itself exists as a resource of abolitionist scholarship, including other scholars' works. By utilizing the existing theoretical research, my capstone fleshes out the contradictions that arise from incorporating abolitionist pedagogies into institutions of higher education. The capstone investigates how to replicate this process of abolition as a pedagogy: that is, interrogating my position as a university student undertaking an academic project that incorporates pedagogies *about* abolition into an abolitionist pedagogy. I examine how institutions like a state funded public university might provide opportunities for generative, collaborative, abolitionist education. If pieces of higher education are to be used for this process of abolition, as Gilmore suggests, it is helpful to apply Rogers' intervention on the definition and value of scholarly work in an effort to shift academic knowledge production to serve a public good. Rogers offers alternative approaches to academic research, like digital media, to expand the possibilities of reaching wider audiences in a more interactive, engaged modality.<sup>21</sup> My capstone is intended to not solely serve as a study of abolition, but a pedagogical practice of

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<sup>21</sup> Rogers, *Putting the Humanities PhD to Work*.

abolition. This practice occurred through my contextualization of abolitionist pedagogy and the incorporation of other scholarly voices to respond and engage with these questions, presented on an interactive site for greater accessibility.<sup>22</sup>

To practice this iteration of collective scholarship, I created a list of potential participants for my project that included scholars whose existing work had influenced my studies of abolition, pedagogy, and/or digital humanities. This list consisted of peers from my coursework and additional scholars recommended to me. Before reaching out to these contacts, I received approval from CUNY's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for conducting research with human subjects. I then began my outreach to potential participants and subsequently scheduled virtual meeting sessions. At the time of submitting this project, the students and scholars who collaborated with me on the digital forum are Ph.D. students and candidates, respectively, in the Urban Education program at the Graduate Center, Lucien Baskin and Karen Zaino; MALS student, Nicole Haiber; MALS graduate, Josefine Ziebell; and Associate Professor of Urban Studies and Anthropology at Guttman Community College, Andrea Morrell. The sessions I had with these five scholars were framed through interview-style conversations, recorded, then cut and posted throughout my website for a narrative flow.

Inspired by Du Bois' understanding of abolition democracy, my capstone applies the concept of abolition not as a simultaneous building of new technologies, social relations, and institutions. In arguing against simply removing the singular institution one seeks to abolish, Du Bois called to abolish the systems of violence that generate and maintain these institutions. This abolitionist approach calls to dismantle existing violent structures, change the conditions they

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<sup>22</sup> Samantha Valenzuela, "Pedagogy of the Digitally Oppressed: An Analysis of e-Learning from a Philosophy of Technology Perspective.," [info:eu-repo/semantics/masterThesis](https://info.eu-repo/semantics/masterThesis) (University of Twente, August 6, 2018), <https://essay.utwente.nl/76035/>.

created, and build new systems in their place.<sup>23</sup> Abolition therefore requires a cultural shift that reimagines new institutions and its social dynamics. Much of my research process was collecting existing scholarship on prison abolition, and applying their approach to abolition as an ongoing process or practice. I use this existing philosophy that abolition is a method not an outcome, and borrow Dylan Rodriguez’s claim that one of the main modes of abolition today is pedagogical. This idea of abolition as pedagogy recognizes that we learn, teach, work, and live within an architecture of violence.<sup>24</sup> Rodriguez wrote this as an educator, to an audience of educators, in order to further surface the contradictions of educational institutions. This claim can be developed by applying Gilmore’s logic that abolition requires us to “change everything,” and through Du Bois’ foundational claims about abolition democracy. These claims reveal a necessity to create sites of knowledge production and circulation, to be aware of the web of violence and organized abandonment intersecting with institutions including the university, and to think anew about how abolition might strategically work to reduce violence and re-organize communities.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, my capstone recalls Rodriguez’s claims about the pedagogical aspect of abolitionism within the contradictory site of the university, and prompts us to imagine the utilization of abolitionist pedagogy outside of formal institutions.<sup>26</sup>

The CUNY Commons website that hosts my capstone outlines what this approach and application of an abolitionist practice could look like through a collaborative conversation, and how the positionality of abolitionist scholarship located in the academy affects and changes the possibilities of abolition created and maintained in the university. I asked all my participants

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<sup>23</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*.

<sup>24</sup> Rodriguez, “The Disorientation of the Teaching Act,” 17.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition*, ed. Naomi Murakawa (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022); DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*.

<sup>26</sup> “Revolutionary Left Radio: White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logics of Genocide,” accessed April 1, 2022, <https://revolutionaryleftradio.libsyn.com/white-reconstruction>.

similar questions to draw out ideas on these issues: What does abolitionist pedagogy look like to you? In content and in form? How does a practice of abolitionist pedagogy maintain abolitionist vision, possibilities, and imagination? And how do you think the university/academy might be restrictive of our imagination, if at all? In reply to these questions, many of my participants emphasized that necessary formations for existing abolitionist practices can and have been happening through the university; two collaborators are currently active participants in abolitionist organizing as well. The conversations included on my capstone website reveal a common sentiment: examining abolitionist efforts as they relate to prisons and policing is transferable to abolitionist organizing in the university.

### **Interdisciplinary Research**

When one hears abolition in 2022, there's probably a tendency to associate it with prison abolition, and for good reason. I saw this firsthand when my project was being workshopped in the MALS Thesis Writing course. Although this project is indebted to explicitly prison abolitionist scholarship, I wanted to explore how the lineage of abolition and how reading abolition as a practice allows for an abolitionist framework to be applied in a Du Boisian sense of creating new educational opportunities. This sparked thinking about my position and my participants' positionality in higher education, and more generally academia's role in abolitionist pedagogy. In response to my question about how prison abolition relates to the unmaking of the university, particularly as it is a central site of abolitionist thinking, Urban Education doctoral student Lucien Baskin saw a connection between schools and prisons, claiming them both as sites of policing, confinement, and control, as well as sites of organizing, love, and radical pedagogy: "There is a radical potentiality of the [university] that I obviously don't see in prisons, while at the same time, as the university exists today, there is a foundation of violence to

them...[but] there is something in the possibility of coming together to study... the radical potential for abolition democracy and the role that schools play in that society.”<sup>27</sup>

Baskin’s insights illuminate a key part of my research, and one that arose in conversations with students and scholars. In short, abolitionist modes of thinking are already reshaping the university. In Gilmore’s presidential address to the American Studies Association in 2011, she asks, what is to be done? Her answer is firm: “Organize. Infiltrate what already exists and innovate what doesn’t.”<sup>28</sup> Gilmore reminds the audience that their titles as academics working for universities also makes them workers. More so, she advocates for university workers to organize to confront their institutional roles as faculty and scholars, and to use teaching, theory, and philosophy as a guide. Here, too, she balances the utopian pursuit of abolitionism with its process of becoming. Robin D.G. Kelly’s review of the speech explicitly states what Gilmore did not: in lingering on Gilmore’s reference to Lenin’s infamous question, Kelley remarks her connection signals that “‘workplace organizing’ in the academy must be transformative intellectual work—it’s about creating insurgent scholarship in a collective setting that might advance the larger goal of freedom.”<sup>29</sup> Gilmore’s related remark in her address that “policy is the new theory” anticipates a lecture at Brown University in which Joy James calls for pragmatism that tends to material needs, without compromising abolitionist vision and desire. I explore James’ further arguments about the limitations and possibility of abolitionism in the academy below. Though Gilmore and James both agree that theory can inform action, they also argue that abolitionist practice needs to mobilize, design, create, and act in response to urgent

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<sup>27</sup> Lucien Baskin, *Practicing Abolition: A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy*, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://malscapstone.commons.gc.cuny.edu/#roundtable-abolitionist-pedagogy>.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “What Is to Be Done?,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (2011): 245–65, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1353/aq.2011.0020>.

<sup>29</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, “What Is to Be Done?,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (2011): 267–70, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1353/aq.2011.0019>.

demands made by the communities directly impacted by abolitionist efforts. Interestingly enough, all of my project participants who are educators reiterated that this balance was significant in their pedagogical approach. In our conversations, they discussed their responsibility to provide skill building and career preparation to their students, simultaneously instilling students with new ideas and knowledge and, as Karen Zaino mentioned, “support[ing] them to understand that they can want more from the world.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Radical Pedagogy as Abolitionist Pedagogy**

This balance of responding to material needs while maintaining an abolitionist vision can be found in the field of radical pedagogy, and reveals how Freire’s legacy informs abolitionist pedagogy. Providing students tools to *read their world* is an effort to make them aware of the ubiquity of abolition and the structures it works against and builds.<sup>31</sup> Freirean pedagogy is concerned with the relationship between student and teacher, and the stagnant knowledge that gets caught in the so-called “banking system of education.”<sup>32</sup> Per its descriptor, the banking system views the teacher in possession of all knowledge, depositing information to the oblivious student, who can only listen passively. These roles mimic socio-cultural oppression outside of the classroom, on a wider scale. This is part of the process of conscientization that Freire uses throughout his work. Conscientization establishes a pedagogy that confronts the social and political relations and contradictions of those engaging with the pedagogy and their terrain.<sup>33</sup> In what Freire refers to as *liberation education*, the contradiction of the oppressive teacher-student

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<sup>30</sup> Karen Zaino, *Practicing Abolition: A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy*, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://malscapstone.commons.gc.cuny.edu/#roundtable-abolitionist-pedagogy>.

<sup>31</sup> Paulo Freire, “The Importance of the Act of Reading,” *Journal of Education* 165, no. 1 (January 1, 1983): 5–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748316500103>.

<sup>32</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

relationship must be reconciled by adopting fluidity in these roles. Freire's peer, Henri Giroux, called his scholarship "the language of critique within the language of possibility."<sup>34</sup> Radical pedagogy scholars' notion of possibilities echoes contemporary abolitionist thinkers like Rodriguez, Gilmore, James, and Kaba who invoke the imagination to underscore this vision.<sup>35</sup>

James expands upon radical pedagogy and abolitionist imagination when she says political imagination is found at sites of struggle by subjects of exploitation, and it is not restricted by the boundaries of academia. She views students at these sites of struggle as the architects of abolitionism, further challenging traditional academic sources and modes of knowledge production that place the teacher at the center. James invokes Walter Rodney's guerilla intellectual and Gilmore's call to action to contextualize her role as an academic and advocate to find "a third way."<sup>36</sup> Walter Rodney conceptualized the "guerrilla intellectual" within institutional constraints, in an effort to ascribe the intellectual purpose of maintaining a relationship to educational institutions. Rodney's idea of "groundings" situates the work of scholars by foregrounding their interventions through a methodology that grounds knowledge production with the masses. Such groundings are particularly important for those who are directly affected by theories and systems of oppression being taught within the academy, particularly Black working class communities.<sup>37</sup> For Rodney, this looked like hosting public lectures at a Jamaican university's campus, *outside of the classroom*, where discussions covered

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<sup>34</sup> Henry A. Giroux, "Introduction," in *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1985), xxi.

<sup>35</sup> *CHANGE: A World Without Prisons*; Dylan Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logics of Genocide* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Joy James, *The Architects of Abolitionism: George Jackson, Angela Davis, and the Deradicalization of Prison Struggles*, (Brown University, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9rvRsWKDx0>; "The Plurality of Abolitionism | Groundings," accessed March 20, 2022, <https://groundings.simplecast.com/episodes/joy-james>.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers*, Reprint (London: Verso Books, 2019).

geopolitics, Black power, and Marxism: “a sitting-down together to reason, to ‘ground.’”<sup>38</sup> Groundings is notably not part of the critical pedagogy canon, though it makes a similar intervention as Freire does by blurring the lines between teacher and student.<sup>39</sup> Part of these shared pedagogies assign the value of knowledge production through praxis, which begins to explain the convergence between theory and practice.<sup>40</sup> Both Rodney and Freire demonstrate how pedagogies should respond to the urgency of social questions and “[meet] people where they are on both a physical and intellectual level.”<sup>41</sup> They practiced their theories and implemented their pedagogies by traveling to various countries in service to the African diaspora and within South America, respectively. These practices are manifestations of the third way according to James, in that they travel to sites of struggle not bound by institutions or borders, and in their search for intellectual camaraderie. In my conversation with MALS student Nicole Haiber, she cited student organizing of the 1960s and the 2016 movement at Standing Rock as relevant examples for abolitionist pedagogy. Such student organizing created educational spaces for protest art, language lessons, or blockade building to respond to the conditions in those moments, and thereby asserted that the tasks of prioritizing material urgency are sometimes the tasks of education.<sup>42</sup>

## **Abolition in the University**

Though the university as a state apparatus is not a fixed conception, and many

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<sup>38</sup> Rodney, 68.

<sup>39</sup> Seneca Vaught, “‘Grounding’ Walter Rodney in Critical Pedagogy: Toward Praxis in African History,” *South* 1, no. 1 (2015): 23.

<sup>40</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1985).

<sup>41</sup> Vaught, “‘Grounding’ Walter Rodney in Critical Pedagogy.”

<sup>42</sup> Nicole Haiber, *Practicing Abolition: A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy*, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://malscapstone.commons.gc.cuny.edu/#roundtable-abolitionist-pedagogy>.

contradictions exist within each unique formation, my capstone unintentionally took shape around the questions of the university and the state through a CUNY-specific lens. Several key CUNY and CUNY-adjacent American studies scholars helped to form my reply to those questions. Inspired by Rodney’s pedagogical approach, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney named the undercommons as the site of fugitive academics, a “nonplace” of abolition: “It cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can.”<sup>43</sup> Harney and Moten’s book, *The Undercommons*, relies on a critique of the state, one that produces and manages the university on behalf of capital. Ruth and Craig Gilmore expand on this involvement with the state through a Gramscian analysis of state power, one that argues that a transformed state and transformed politics are co-constitutive. *The Undercommons* suggests that the university, “in the circle of the American state,” reveals the fluctuating entanglement of the state and the university. The Gilmores argue that a proximity to the state — despite co-optation and counterinsurgency efforts, as described by Ferguson and James in the following section— actually enables us to transform its ideology and legitimacy. When contending for us to “fight where the state is,” the Gilmores reflect that the university, emboldened by state powers, is a worthy location of abolitionist organizing and possibility.<sup>44</sup>

Though a CUNY affiliation was not a prerequisite to participate in my capstone, and though I reached out to non-CUNY participants, upon the time of submitting this project all the participants are either faculty or graduate students at CUNY. To be sure, scholars’ affiliation to a

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<sup>43</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, 1st edition (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), 26; Robin D. G. Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” *Boston Review*, March 1, 2016, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/robin-kelley-Black-struggle-campus-protest/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, “Restating the Obvious,” *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*, January 1, 2007, 159.

school system and university affects their views on abolitionist pedagogy in the university. I found it noteworthy that my capstone participants often touched on how abolitionist practice exists already in organizing, in communities, and through relationships at CUNY. They echoed Gilmore's advocacy to demand more resources and educational opportunities from the state, the university, and CUNY. I asked my participants how they view the university's role in abolition and heard similar sentiments: free tuition, higher wages, and open admissions. These are all demands that have historical significance in the U.S. university system and at CUNY.

These responses signaled a contradiction of the university as a place of confinement and radical potential, as quoted earlier. This is also articulated in *We Demand: The University and Student Protests*, in which Roderick Ferguson stresses the importance of knowing one's historical position especially when taking up a liberation framework, especially in terms of his focus on the radical student movements in the 1960s and 70s. Ferguson analyzes the push and pull from other scholars—as discussed above—about pursuing social reorder through the university by categorizing the university as a site of contradiction.<sup>45</sup> In this historical recounting, Ferguson claims that interception by universities' administrative power is one of the ways this contradiction tends to resolve itself. The 1960s and 70s campus movements and their radical students demanded diversity on campus and in the curricula, and this was an explicit call for redistribution of power. Instead of recognizing an uneven field of power and personhood to transform academia, Ferguson argues that campus administration reduced student activism into a “personal grievance,” extracting from the collective, institutional, and social changes intended from these demands.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, administrative power grows by certifying minority

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<sup>45</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson, *We Demand: The University and Student Protests*, First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Ferguson, 25.

personhood and denying insurgency. This included administrations feigning concern for student activists while co-opting their demands for diversity into a digestible bureaucratic model. The resulting changes did not occur as a result of student demands, but as the “administrative and bureaucratic response to those demands.”<sup>47</sup> This echoes James' warning about the dangers of abolitionism becoming embedded in the academy, saying that if abolitionist language and imagination belong to the academy, then abolitionist desire becomes derivative and risks manipulation by the state.<sup>48</sup>

This problem of ideology in liberation efforts also aligns with Grace Kyungwon Hong's analysis of Black feminism in the university. She cites the Black feminist Barbara Christian to pose the idea of university access as important to abolitionism, and as important as what happens after students arrive. They thus echo the radical students' demands in Ferguson's account, who demanded access and relevancy in universities for the purpose of changing the climates of these institutions, and with the larger goal of social transformation. Citing James, Hong reminds us that the seminal Black feminist text by the Combahee River Collective (CRC) in 1977 is intersectional, but also explicitly anti-capitalist and socialist.<sup>49</sup> The demands and practices to widen access and increase representation often take similar shapes regardless of ideology—like diversity for transformation and diversity for bureaucratization—though the differences of these approaches lie in the goals and visions. These scholars use historical context to warn us that liberation struggles can still be co-opted through airbrushing their radical and revolutionary ideology.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ferguson, 26.

<sup>48</sup> James, *The Architects of Abolitionism*.

<sup>49</sup> Grace Hong, “‘The Future of Our Worlds’: Black Feminism and The Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization,” *Meridians* 8 (April 1, 2008): 107.

<sup>50</sup> James, *The Architects of Abolitionism*; Ferguson, *We Demand*.

Situated within the Black Radical Tradition, the Black feminist strand that emerges from the Combahee River Collective is vital in shaping my project's framework. The CRC's intersectional definition of Black feminism demonstrates that people are exploited differently; thus, abolition looks different for different people. For example, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor analyzes the significance of the CRC to create "entry points for Black women to engage in politics."<sup>51</sup> In searching for a definition of abolitionist pedagogy, part of my methodology was to locate threads of abolitionist practice through interdisciplinary scholarship. Using Taylor's idea of entry points—an intervention also noted in my conversation with Andrea Morrell— this methodology of spotting abolitionist thinking where abolitionism isn't explicitly announced was used in hopes of creating entry points to abolition.<sup>52</sup>

For example, when Hong goes on to position Black feminism as an epistemological practice that seeks to recreate the current university paradigm of knowledge production, this is itself an abolitionist pedagogy and practice. In presenting the field of Black feminism as a tool for challenging traditional structures of the university, Hong invokes the sentiment of another discipline, critical university studies (CUS). CUS is a fairly recent field that identifies the boundaries of the university as a site of "the circulation of knowledge, and of neoliberal restructuring."<sup>53</sup> CUS presents the problem of the modern U.S. university through its exploitation of graduate students' labor, its dependency on adjunct positions, its defunding of humanities programs, and its increasing corporatization.<sup>54</sup> The field also entertains the potential of

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<sup>51</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Haymarket Books, 2017), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Andrea Morrell, *Practicing Abolition: A Digital Roundtable on Abolitionist Pedagogy*, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://malscapstone.commons.gc.cuny.edu/#roundtable-abolitionist-pedagogy>.

<sup>53</sup> Jason Read, "University Experience: Neoliberalism Against the Commons," in *Toward a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, The Production of Knowledge, and Exodus*, First edition (New York: Autonomedia, 2009), 151.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, "Deconstructing Academe," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 19,

“unmaking the university” as it asserts higher education as a public, democratic good. In “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation,” the authors Abbie Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein rely on CUS to apply a methodology of making abolition explicit.<sup>55</sup> They contextualize the university by referencing texts that link land theft and slavery to the building of universities, thereby emphasizing the accumulation of lands and resources embedded in settler colonialism, and position abolition against racial capitalism and liberalism. While universities’ complicity to this historical violence differs, they operate under the same mechanism of social order, one that seeks to maintain it, not transform it. Thus, abolitionist university studies surfaces another contradiction of the university as an institution of control that holds space and potential for abolitionism. In our conversation, Karen Zaino also reminded me that the university is not exceptional in this historical framing, and Lucien Baskin echoed that the abolitionist framework of “change everything erases the border of the university and campus.”<sup>56</sup> Abolitionist university studies argues that contending with this intertwined history creates an opportunity “to see universities as complex terrains with many conflicting and intersecting modes of world-making.”<sup>57</sup> In sum, the abolitionist methodology intersects with the field of CUS to promote ways of seeing utopian endeavors as tangible.

In order to look at these practices and evaluate their utility and service to an abolitionist vision, particularly my discussions with other students and scholars, my capstone rehearses existing scholarship of abolitionist pedagogy, surveys what practices have been implemented, and scans where they appear locally. I acknowledge that I am not reinventing a conception of

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2012, sec. The Review, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/deconstructing-academe/>.

<sup>55</sup> Abbie Boggs et al., “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation,” accessed August 12, 2021, <https://abolition.university/invitation/>.

<sup>56</sup> Baskin, *Practicing Abolition*; Zaino, *Practicing Abolition*.

<sup>57</sup> Boggs et al., “Abolitionist University Studies.”

abolitionist pedagogy, but I am situating my project within a historical, geographical, and temporal context, and I understand this to be a practice of critical pedagogy and abolitionist thinking.

Of course this methodology has its limitations; James' warning about diluting the revolutionary nature of abolition is a reminder that not every approach will produce abolitionist reality. James suggests there is a plurality of abolitionism that should be accounted for in any abolitionist practice and pedagogy. That is, abolition is not a singular formation, but instead consists of various, distinct approaches. To meet people where they are, with accompanying abolitionist possibility, means imagining abolitionism as a daily, historical practice that can be found in both academic disciplines and non-traditional scholarship. In extension of Gilmore's idea of abolition as a constant becoming, many abolitionist scholars envision a long timeline for the trajectory of abolition, acknowledging that abolition is "speculative futurity," a practice that is satisfied with producing a future reality that its practitioners may never experience.<sup>58</sup>

### **Digital Methodology**

James, Rodriguez, and Gilmore's heavy emphasis on doing, not just knowing, informed my decision to do a capstone instead of a thesis. I conceptualized my project's form as a digital, open access platform in the spirit of melding theory and practice. Utilizing the ethos of collaborative and creative pedagogy, I wanted this project to not just present my individual scholarship—one that already relies on the scholarship of others—but showcase the intellectual cohesion of abolitionist scholarship. Presenting these theories and conversations about them in a virtual space brings this knowledge outside of the classroom. First, I researched CUNY's Digital Humanities program and track in the MALS program to further explore CUNY Commons and

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<sup>58</sup> Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction*, 221.

CUNY Manifold as potential sites to host my capstone. I used both platforms throughout the MALS program, though CUNY Commons held a greater utility and presence to me during the past two years of remote learning, as most of my courses utilized the site for syllabi, class discussions, and assignments. Seeing the pedagogical possibility first-hand aided my decision to choose CUNY Commons, particularly as the platform allows for entirely open access sites. Any viewer can read and interact with the site without the limitations of account registration or any university affiliation.

There are quite a few virtual spaces that inspired my own. *Hybrid Pedagogy*, self-described as “a community, a conversation, a collaboration, a school, and a journal,” compiles resources, stories, and tools to form a website on digital critical pedagogy.<sup>59</sup> The founders of the online journal pull from Freire and bell hooks to create an academic, theoretical, and practical site that relies on collaboration and connection to share knowledge. Carmen Kynard’s *Black Feminist Pedagogies* explores open coursework, syllabi, reading lists, and discussion forums.<sup>60</sup> The part of the site used for graduate coursework brings creativity and fun to abolitionist teaching and learning. Browsing other sites like *Abolition Journal*, *Abolitionist Futures*, and *Abolition Is* informed how resource sharing, including the use of study guides, are integral to digital abolitionist pedagogies.<sup>61</sup> MALS graduate Josefine Ziebell also recently completed a capstone project with a digital, site-based component. The project’s site, *Queer and Trans Prison Voices*, hosts a sonic archive of incarcerated voices and a podcast series with activists, scholars, and artists in the abolitionist movement. I view her digital capstone as an abolitionist practice of

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<sup>59</sup> “Hybrid Pedagogy | About,” Hybrid Pedagogy, December 31, 2015, <https://hybridpedagogy.org/about/>.

<sup>60</sup> Carmen Kynard, “Black Feminist Pedagogies,” Black Feminist Pedagogies, accessed March 26, 2022, <http://www.Blackfeministpedagogies.com/>.

<sup>61</sup> “Abolition Journal,” Abolition Journal, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://abolitionjournal.org/>; “Reading List,” Abolitionist Futures, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://abolitionistfutures.com/reading-lists/>; “Abolition Is...,” Abolition Is..., accessed March 26, 2022, <https://abolition-is.com>.

educational, collective study.<sup>62</sup>

In one blog post, the founders of *Hybrid Pedagogy* quote bell hooks: “At its best, teaching is a caring profession.”<sup>63</sup> This statement reveals another parallel to abolition, as building apparatuses of care is a process of abolition democracy. Lucien Baskin stated that love and care were the object of abolition, and Nicole Haiber viewed care at the center of abolitionist pedagogy.<sup>64</sup> And in a podcast episode featured as part of her capstone project, Josefine Ziebell noted that abolition is not just about institutions, but rethinking our understandings of community.<sup>65</sup> My own project wasn’t born out of teaching experience or in pursuance of a teaching profession, but one as a student whose experience of learning was exciting enough to bring outside the classroom. My capstone provided self-reflection as a student. I activated Freire’s teacher-student dialectic to collaborate with other students, teachers, and student-teachers to reflect on the practice of abolition, their pedagogical approach, and the prospect of abolitionist pedagogy. My digital methodology intended to explore abolitionist pedagogy not as prescribed or static, but a relational method to adopt and continuously adapt.

### **Continuation of the Project**

The nature of my capstone as a digital asynchronous forum on an open access website offers potential for use after formal submission to the MALS program. As stated previously, I chose CUNY Commons for its accessibility to people outside of CUNY or any institution to

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<sup>62</sup> Josefine Ziebell, “Queer and Trans Prison Voices: A Podcast Archive on Prison Abolition,” *Manifold @CUNY*, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices>.

<sup>63</sup> Jesse Stommel, Chris Friend, and Sean Michael Morris, “Critical Digital Pedagogy: A Collection,” *Hybrid Pedagogy*, July 31, 2020, <https://hybridpedagogy.org/critical-digital-pedagogy/>.

<sup>64</sup> Baskin, *Practicing Abolition*; Haiber, *Practicing Abolition*.

<sup>65</sup> Josefine Ziebell, “Episode 2: Abolition as Praxis with Dylan Rodriguez,” *Podcast Series: Queer & Trans Voices*, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource-collection/podcast-series-queer-and-trans-prison-voices/resource/episode-2-abolition-as-praxis-with-dylan-rodriguez>.

view and interact with the site. Any visitor to the site is invited to comment and contribute to the existing conversation. I also welcome the opportunity to expand the roundtable further in the future; my initial outreach included more than the five participants mentioned above, but I was time-limited with finding a larger number of participants. In particular, I hope to add more racial, gender, and institutional inclusion in future discussions. Additionally, I was intentional about one of the site sections hosting an abbreviated glossary of key terms. This idea was in part due to the collaborative feedback from MALS peers during our Thesis Writing Workshop, where they saw early iterations of the site's contents and prompted further explanation and interest in certain topics and terminology presented in my capstone. With this section in mind, I imagine the site to be a resource for other scholars as an aid in their research, or to further their interest in abolitionist pedagogy, or for insight on digital and collaborative capstone projects.

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