



*Abolition
Science
Fiction*



EDITED BY PHIL CROCKETT THOMAS



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Editing: Phil Crockett Thomas

Design: Maeve Redmond

Illustrations: Nat Walpole

Proof Reading: Matt Mahon

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INTRODUCTION: DO ANDROIDS DREAM
OF ELECTRONIC MONITORING?
Phil Crockett Thomas

Welcome fellow intergalactic abolitionist adventurers!

This is a collection of short science fiction stories written by activists and scholars involved in prison abolition and transformative justice in the UK. It is also a workshopping tool designed to help people explore ideas about abolition and transformative justice in creative ways. It is aimed both at those curious about abolition and at seasoned activists who want to explore abolition through creative writing.

In the first part of this book (called *Reading*) are the stories. Some of these were written by people who had never done any creative writing before, some were written by people with a regular writing practice, some are polished, and some are uncut gems. Some were written by activists with decades of experience, others by people who have been active a short while. The stories are not all explicitly about prison abolition, but all of them explore the underlying question of how we can live well together, and as such they can help us imagine a future without exclusion and punishment. The stories are organised into groups based on the themes they explore, but there are plenty of overlaps and different ways that they could have been organised.

The stories in the first section all take place in prisons during times of riot and liberation. The stories in the second section all take place after the end of prisons, whether in the immediate aftermath or set later in a society without prisons. The stories in the third section are on broader social themes; mutual responsibility, entanglement, and telepathy! The stories in the final section could all be termed ‘critical utopias’¹: stories which depict more just futures but do not shy away from the shady corners of the utopia. Each section starts with the stories, followed by extracts from our discussions, prompts for discussion or writing, and further reading and resources to explore (usually in footnotes). Our discussion was guided by the stories we wrote. This book isn’t intended as a definitive or comprehensive introduction to abolition and transformative justice.²

In the second part of this book (*Writing*), there are writing exercises of varying lengths and difficulty, including the exercises we used in the workshops where the stories were created. You can work through this resource on your own, but in case you would like to explore it with friends and comrades we have also included some possible workshop plans.

This book came out of a research project called Prison Break, led by Phil Crockett Thomas. Although Phil edited this resource, the ideas and insights contained within it reflect our collective knowledge. The discussions from the workshops where we read and wrote about science fiction, abolition, and transformative justice together are woven throughout the text. There are also some illustrations by Nat Walpole which were inspired by the stories. As a group we don't agree on everything; we have different hopes and fears for abolition, and have had different experiences of the justice system and its alternatives. On reading the draft of this book, Sarah, one of the contributors, perceptively commented that 'maybe one parallel with prison and sci fi is that both often seem abstract or placeless, whereas abolition tries to counter this by bringing real people and communities back into the picture.' The people who contributed to this book live in Scotland, England, and Wales, with most based in Scotland's Central Belt and London. This locatedness is important because local issues and struggles ground our practice as abolitionists, while we engage with analysis and ideas from elsewhere. We hope that reading the book feels like taking part in a conversation among comrades. We also hope you find the resource useful, and that if you don't already have a dedicated creative space in your activist practice for imagining what a future without prisons could be like, it can help support that. This is a workbook so please feel free to scribble notes in the margins. You can also let us know how you got on or ask any questions at abolitionscifi@gmail.com.

ABOLITION AND SCIENCE FICTION

'What counter-spell is powerful enough to break the prison's stranglehold on our imagination?

But the spell is never total. The intensification of the desire for life undermines the prison's capacity to structure our mental lives.

*Imagination is excess, is that which could never be contained by the prison, that which will always exceed it.'*³

In the quote above, Jackie Wang references the dominance of the prison in our collective imagining of the best response to harm and conflict, and of justice served. As Angela Davis argues, ‘the prison is considered so “natural” that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.’⁴ This doesn’t just relate to the formal criminal justice system, but also to the punitive logics at play in our schools, workplaces, communities, and families. Our dominant cultural tendency to isolate, blame, and shame individuals necessitates the practice of an ‘everyday abolition’⁵ that extends far beyond the prison.

Abolitionists believe that the function of prisons is first and foremost to punish and harm those who come into contact with them, and that as such, they can’t be redesigned or reformed into institutions that support healing. As abolitionists we are used to being told by critics that our ideas are dangerous, deluded or utopian, but the evidence shows us that having faith in prisons to solve social problems is unjustified. Crime and harm are not synonymous: in the UK there are acts legally defined as crimes which cause little harm but are heavily prosecuted, like writing graffiti, and harms like polluting the environment which are not prosecuted as crimes. The bulk of our prison population is comprised of some of the most marginalised people in society. Police and prisons don’t make our communities safer; they break up families and destroy people’s mental health.

John, one of the participants in the project, commented that ‘I think this feels like a really optimistic time. A far greater number of people are now confident that a better world is possible and are beginning to think and articulate it.’ Abolitionists today can draw on a wealth of knowledge from earlier phases of the movement, but with the sobering sense that our contribution is to something ongoing and much bigger than our individual efforts. As Thomas Mathiesen wrote back in 1974, ‘the alternative lies in the “unfinished”, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing.’⁶ If we want to abolish prisons and punishment, we must unleash our imaginations to develop and practice different and better ways of responding to harm, holding people to account for their actions. In our workshop discussions it became clear that criminal justice is just one part of this vision for a more just society, reflecting the oft-quoted sensibility of Ruth Wilson Gilmore that ‘abolition requires that we change one thing: everything.’⁷ As we discussed, this ‘change everything’ is not destroy everything and start over but about ‘building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can.’⁸

We used creative writing workshops, reading and writing science fiction, to tap into the imaginative excess identified by Wang. This approach was inspired by the speculative fiction anthology *Octavia's Brood*,⁹ named in honour of the Black feminist writer Octavia E. Butler, and collectively workshopped and penned by social justice activists in the U.S.A. The editors adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha describe their activism and political organising as a form of science fiction, because of way it entails moving beyond the boundaries of what seems realistic or possible.¹⁰ They termed the work in the anthology 'visionary fiction', developing a collective practice through which to not only explore dystopian scenes but also to dare to show their desires, and share visions for a better future.¹¹

Many authors, such as Ray Bradbury, Samuel R. Delany, and Ursula K. Le Guin, have argued that sci fi is really about the present rather than the future. So while it can imagine *distant* futures that are more just, it can also aid us in identifying issues in the present and in imagining and enacting better alternatives in the *near* future. There is a long history of (some) sci fi being used as a tool to challenge ideologies, especially those that are dominant or naturalised, and of fiction written by people who were political dissidents or socially marginalised, for example, Afrofuturist writers like Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler, and Soviet dissidents like Yevgeny Zamyatin. In the workshops where the stories in this collection were written, we tried to come up with ideas for a 'novum'¹² (new thing) that would change the way we respond to harm and conflict in our society. Something that would expose the naturalised ideology of the prison and mean that prisons or punishment would no longer seem necessary. We also tried to incorporate an unintended consequence of that novum into our plots, in order to generate stories with more narrative complexity. After all, as readers we tend to be suspicious of utopias claiming to have neatly solved all our problems and characters that blithely agree. Further, a utopia where there is no friction or divergence tends to make for a tale lacking in dynamics; heaven needs the devil to create some drama!¹³

Thinking about unintended consequences also helped us create what Tom Moylan terms 'critical utopias'. Moylan describes how while early to mid-twentieth century utopianism was cowed by its co-option into authoritarian regimes, genocide, and nuclear projects, a 'subversive utopianism'¹⁴ bloomed in the late 1960s. These were literary critical utopias which 'reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream.'¹⁵ Novels like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Joanna Russ's

The Female Man (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Samuel R. Delany's *Triton* (1976), were the progeny of decades of activism and social unrest towards civil rights, feminist, and sexual liberation. So for example, Le Guin shows us the complexity of both the capitalist planet Urras and anarchist moon Anarres in *The Dispossessed*. Critical utopia was also a useful concept to work with because many of us felt embarrassed or uncomfortable with the idea of writing utopia. For example, Sarah commented,

'I find utopia really hard, because either you're going back to a time before we needed prison, or to a rural place where the scales of society are such that they don't seem to require these responses to harm.'

Some of us found the challenge of utopian thinking overwhelming, or that it pushed us into a 'problem-solving mode' that was ultimately depressing because our 'solutions' felt limited. Dystopia, on the other hand, can be comfortingly familiar; as consumers we seek out representations of societies which extrapolate from the worst of our current tendencies, like the multi-season TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* (based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel), where religion, totalitarianism, and population anxiety converge. For Dave, there is a danger that dystopian representations can 'exculpate the present', letting us off the hook for our current problems by imagining a worse future. However, for Lamble there is something expansive and hopeful here: 'Even in the dystopia there is always the threat of resistance that is consistent... I'm struck by this feeling of embarrassment about the utopian, and yet the utopian is still within the dystopian but is somehow more open, or the possibilities aren't closed, maybe?' Wherever we find it or make it, then, the utopian is an invitation to keep imagining otherwise. As Lisa Garforth and Miranda Iossifidis perceptively note:

*'Utopia refuses the comfort of unreflexively inhabiting our world as it is and instead offers the prospect of finding a new way to feel at home in a transfigured society. It occupies a cognitive and affective space in-between the good place and the no place. It is linked, then, perhaps intrinsically, to the uncomfortable, the uncanny and the unresolved.'*¹⁶

If you're sitting uncomfortably, then we'll begin.

1 Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible; Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, New edition (Oxford: Peter Lang UK, 2014).

2 If you're new to the idea of prison abolition we recommend exploring some of the following resources: Thomas Mathiesen, *The Politics of Abolition* (London: Martin Robertson for the Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology, 1974); Fay Honey Knopp, Barbara Boward, and Mark O Morris, *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Prison Research Education Action Project, 1976); Angela Y Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010); Cradle Community, *Brick by Brick: How We Build a World Without Prisons* (London: Hajar Press, 2021); Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Tamara K. Nopper (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021); Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2022); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (S.l.: Verso, 2022). The Abolitionist Futures website has extensive resources and a themed reading list which is a brilliant place to start: <https://abolitionistfutures.com/reading-lists>. They also run regular reading groups if you enjoy reading with others.

3 Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotexte, 2017), 316.

4 Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 10.

5 Sarah Lamb, "Practising Everyday Abolition," in *Abolishing the Police: An Illustrated Introduction*, ed. Koshka Duff (Birmingham: Dog Section Press, 2021), <https://dogsection.org/press/abolishing-the-police/>.

6 Mathiesen, *The Politics of Abolition*, 1.

7 Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Leopold Lambert, "Making Abolition Geography in California's Central Valley," *THE FUNAMBULIST MAGAZINE*, 2018, <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/21-space-activism/interview-making-abolition-geography-california-central-valley-ruth-wilson-gilmore>.

8 Gilmore and Lambert.

9 adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, eds., *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015).

10 Walidah Imarisha, "How Science Fiction Can Re-Envision Justice," *Bitch Media*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/rewriting-the-future-prison-abolition-science-fiction>.

11 See also Writers 4 Utopia <https://writers4utopia.wixsite.com/zine> and Callum Copley, ed., *Reworlding Ramallah: Short Science Fiction Stories from Palestine* (Eindhoven : Haifa: Onomatopoe, 2019).

12 This concept comes from Ernst Bloch, but was popularised by Darko Suvin see: Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

13 This exercise was based on one Phil learned from Michael Deerwater, a sci fi scholar and writer.

14 Moylan, *Demand the Impossible; Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, 10.

15 Moylan, 10.

16 Lisa Garforth and Miranda Jeanne Marie Iossifdis, "WEIRDING UTOPIA FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE Hope, Un/Home and the Uncanny in Annihilation and The City We Became," *PULSE: The Journal of Science and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2020): 2.

Reading

*'In a modern Utopia there will, indeed, be no perfection;
in Utopia there must also be friction, conflicts and waste,
but the waste will be enormously less than in our world'*

- H.G Wells (1905) A Modern Utopia.

Prison Break

PR2 sleeps fitfully, jogged awake constantly night and day.

Reception officer at Barlinnie taps in,

“TTM assessment done”, and tells the escort officer, “Nah, he don’t need a safer cell, put him in A hall.”

A deputy governor in Grampian peers at a Post-it then enters the password, scanning line after line after line of a disciplinary record. “This orderly’s going to be a long one”, she sighs.

In Leith, in the open plan government office, the analyst stares at a computer screen. “Where’s the damn reception date field”, she grumbles, sipping her coffee.

A prisoner whispers into his phone, “I’m missing you so much, I’m going crazy in here. I need to find someone holding, I can’t cope,” while an intelligence officer listens and notes it all down.

The Parole Board member checks the paperwork, downloaded and printed for today’s hearing. “The dossier says you’ve had no visits in five years. Your family dead or not talking to you?” He doesn’t look up, into defeated eyes. The parole denial will be entered in by an officer after she’s returned to her cell.

On the hall, late, another prisoner hits the call button, pressing down hard, his exhausted neighbours pulling blankets over heads to quieten the noise. “You better believe I’m filing a complaint on this one”, he wails, to no one who’s listening. In the morning, after they open the door and look inside, the officer can’t help but think about the paperwork there will be, as he rushes in to cut the rope.

PR2 is the Prison Records System, version 2. It’s an ‘award-winning’ Millennial baby, an ageing Frankenstein dreamt by Bertillon and built from *“Oracle Forms 6 and Oracle Reports 6, Oracle Database Version 9i, SQL, PL/SQL, Perl, C Language, Microsoft Office VB, Centura SQL Windows, GPass Development Toolkit, Solaris 10, address validation software, Business Objects, i2, Robohelp online user help information system, Databac card production software, Labtec and Microsoft USB Web Cam, the export and import of Office 2007 and Adobe formatted documents and data.”*²

It breathes in life and breathes out:

- *The management and recording of all prisoner movements both internal and external;*
- *The recording of all prisoner's personal details including name, address, physical characteristics, photograph, next of kin details and any risks associated with the prisoner;*
- *The recording of a prisoner's custodial criminal offences, current and historic;*
- *The management and recording of all prisoner's cash;*
- *The recording and calculation of a prisoner's critical dates; e.g. earliest date of liberation;*
- *The recording of intelligence involving prisoners and prisoner involvement in incidents;*
- *The recording of prisoner activities;*
- *Mandatory and voluntary drug test functionality;*
- *The recording and management of prisoner complaints;*
- *The recording of prisoner case management information; and*
- *The recording of prisoner visitor information.*

PR2 grows as it flows – through halls, front desks, back offices, classrooms and conference PowerPoints. People sucked up, chewed up and spat out as their parts, human meal poured into hungry, gaping mouths: the risk prediction machine, the parole hearing, the research study, the annual report, the ICMs and RMTs and MAPPAs.

As people wait, and wait, PR2 steals their highs and lows, their sense and their nonsense. It names them in the spirit of Miss Flite's birds:³ suicide attempt, age, weight and height, bereavement, methadone prescription, offender behaviour course completion, conviction history, liberation date, canteen order, prosocial factors, fighting report. Bumpy backgrounds binarized to invent infinitudes of the same story. Risk up/down, remand pop up/down, suicide history yes/no. Chaotic lives and bad childhoods in, recidivism risk out. PR2 is the black box around a black hole, a nothingness that grows from its insatiable appetite for stars.

1 *After Zorbaugh* (1929) as quoted in Andrew Abbott, "Against Narrative: A Preface to Lyrical Sociology," *Sociological Theory* 25, no. 1 (2007): 67–99.

2 Scottish Prison Service Contract Award Notice for PR2 System (2010) https://www.publiccontractsscotland.gov.uk/search/show/search_view.aspx?ID=JUN079019

3 Miss Flite is a character in Charles Dickens's (1852) novel *Bleak House* awaiting a decision of the Chancery Court, accumulating a group of caged birds she will release when judgment comes: Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach.

A FINE SEAM
River Ellen MacAskill

The day the hackers intend to shut off the National Grid, Phoebe is ready and waiting. A communiqué from the city had arrived two days before in some sanitary towels she got from the canteen. She's infertile and has never menstruated in her five years of sentience but she knows that *feminine hygiene products* are the preferred carrier for intel, so every once in a while she spends her credits on them. The administration continue stocking them, blindly fulfilling contracts, while the prison fills up with fewer bio-women and more and more inorganics. She's relieved she chose the pads over data that week, knowing what she now knows. As the digital clock display edges on noon, she sits on her creaking bed frame, waiting for the lights to click off.

By shutting off the electricity supply for the whole country and interrupting as many internet connections and emergency generators as possible, the hackers hope to create a one-hour window for institutional breakdown to kick off: automated security systems will shut down, alarms will sound, banks, prisons, and other physical limbs of the state and its corporate lifeblood will be vulnerable to anarchic damage from various angles.

Phoebe has little understanding of the security systems that keep her in isolation, but she knows that since being put away for killing a client in self-defence two years ago, she has barely seen another face inside these walls: the voices of her neighbours are muffled by thick insulated walls and food is delivered to her door by humming machines. Her sentence is terminal. She'll be left in here until the next clone cull, when the agency that created them will harvest the dissidents from various cells and deactivate them. She and her sisters are unkillable, except from a small loophole in their code that can be rewritten during software updates. Cruel, she sometimes thinks, to rob them of the choice to end their so-called lives themselves if they wish.

Just as the clock hits 12:01 and her heart starts to sink in doubt, her cell goes dark. She shoots up towards the door, bashing into the corner of the bed, waiting for a click. There is no handle on her side of the door, just a fine seam between the wall and door that she traces with her finger, holding her breath in anticipation of a crack of space that might never come. She turns to fish around in the dim light for a tool of some kind, then a kick sends the door towards her with a thud. She jumps back. At the threshold stands an older woman, grey hair shaved

close and a tattooed code beside her eye. She's old school, one of the first generation of inorganics.

"Quick," she mouths, under the noise of the alarms that ring like banshees, and pulls Phoebe by the arm. Her leg muscles have atrophied since she lost her outdoor privileges and she makes it to the end of the corridor on pure adrenaline. "We've got someone else to pick up, here," shouts the sister. They skid to a halt at the only remaining door in the corridor. The woman puts her ear to it. A rhythmic thumping comes from inside.

Phoebe wrenches open the door, and comes face to face with a sister - hair shorter and skin darker than hers, but the same generation by the looks of the faint lines emerging around her eyes, lit by a wild fire. Her tight fist drops to her side from where she was banging for help.

"Where now?" she says to Phoebe, and it's like hearing her own voice played back to her. The bald woman has taken a fire extinguisher from the wall and bashes at the fire exit until it clatters open into the stairwell. The sirens stop abruptly. For a split second, they look at each other, stock still, then turn and run down the stairs towards a door, a final door, and the light.

5AM DMC WITH AN ALIEN
Josie Tothill

It doesn't make any sense. In what world does it make sense that if pain is created, the answer is more pain? Forget morality - logically, materially, that is fucked.

We lose our whole world around love. I have never met no one who doesn't love. Or feel pain for a lack of love, which is a kind of love.

Love was on the rise but the real catalyst for it was the dancing plague. Mate, I was there. The prison where it started - I was working in the laundrette. It was a shite job but I actually really rated the guys. They were jokey. I liked that I could give them the time of day you know, not like the guards. The guards was always confiscating this one lad, Matthew's speakers. He was a good guy, a bit cracked. Probably from the prison. But he loved music.

One day the guard was trying to take his speaker so he threw it up on the rafter where no one could get it. At first it was just like everyone razzing the guards. Cos it reverberated through the prison something in the acoustics up there. So everyone was dancing. But soon as they were moving, moving together, sharing joy there was no going back.

THE SEED
Lizzie Hughes

The seed is in a plant pot, buried in its mud. The pot is faded yellow, average sized, thick rimmed at the top narrowing to a circular base. The kind of thing you see and instantly forget (in fact, I had to look at it a few times to write that). It sits out of the way on top of one of the grey filing cabinets in the corner (I think the one with the risk assessments in); someone's idea to bring life into this place of death (probably Linda's). No one knows what kind of plant it is.

No one waters it either, and yet it grows

and grows

and grows. It grows,

tendrils curving and arching up up up toward the office window with reinforced glass; its thick ivy leaves conceal what it is up to as it grows grows into the walls of the office, into the bricks, into the infrastructure of the prison, causing cracks. Each day, it prises apart the prison's molecules, it travels further into its fibres, winding deeper and deeper. It spreads across concrete yards like a green lush carpet. It travels

down

drains

and finds its way across convoluted masses of electrical cables and antiquated plumbing systems, up through toilet basins, connecting cell to cell creating organic pathways growing and growing and growing and *spreading*. Always silently. Everyone thinks it's just a potted plant, so no one pays it much attention.

They do not know that one day - one day soon - it will split these prison walls in two. No, not just two: but into three into *thousands into millions* of blocks; choke and tremble and collapse them into infinite concrete shards. Into the sunlight dulled bodies will surge, clambering over the ruins desperately running to escape their nightmares, gulping new air that is not very clean but somehow delicious, tasting as fresh as

springtime fruit, offering something nebulous but sparkling, clear, free. Offering landscapes that are too big too bright too loud with too many things in them. Too much to feel after a concrete cage. These skies are open: e n d l e s s.

If seeds could smile, this one would (but that's absurd, it's just a seed). Instead, it does what it does best: instead, its tendrils continue systematically destroying the prison (it's very methodical) breaking it apart, making it dust, dissolving it into the Earth who eats the pain that kept these walls in business. It's ok, Mother Earth can handle it; she wants her due reckoning.

These hells on her Earth, powerless at last.

Only one structure will remain. I can see it: a tall, cylindrical block in the far corner, where the segregation unit used to be. A raven is sat on top of it. A dark outline against a brilliant white sky. This is the memorial: to those these walls killed, to those who didn't get out in time, to those we couldn't save. And the reminder: to never let this happen again.

But for now, the seed quietly does its work (I told you, it's methodical). Like a programme. *Like a revolution.*



PRISON PLANET 824
Richard C Quorum

200 Cryptosuits moved across the docking bay, perfectly synchronised. Marching to a rhythm programmed many light years away. Inside one suit Rannoch eased his body into the motion as he'd long learnt to do, his eyes darting around, scanning the new landscape, as his body contorted to the rhythm of the suit. He felt it stop, saw a large stage in front of him with a few people on it, fiddling with a microphone, suit-less. These must be the wardens of Prison Planet 824. As one of them stepped up to a lectern he felt a sensation at the back of his spine, something he'd not felt before.

"Friends" the voice said, "you're about to experience an unusual feeling. Please don't be alarmed. This is us releasing the bind on your Cryptosuit. You may fall or collapse. We will help you back up." Rannoch blinked fast, his breathing short. A horrible joke? But as the voice continued, he felt his body loosen from the vice of the suit. "My name is Adel," the voice continued. "I'm one of the outworld communicators here. Our job is to maintain the fiction to the old world that this prison still operates as they founded it... Every few decades they send us some new inmates, you. My job is to explain to you all that you are now free, whilst convincing the origin world that you are not. We once stood where you are, until we dispelled the wardens. Now I'll tell you how that happened..."

The stories in this section explore prison, prison breaks, riot, and rescue. River's story *A Fine Seam*, with its sisterhood of banged-up clones, reminded Katherine of 'mutual aid scenarios that you see enacted by people in prison. That's a way that people sometimes organise themselves, or a way that they care for each other when the prison's not doing that work (or it's not there to do that work).' Sarah added that 'so many relations of care within prisons, which have to happen for people to survive, are either ignored or criminalised' and Phil talked about how advice and support provided by women serving long sentences to those on remand or newly arrived, was re-cast by the prison administration as 'bullying' because 'everything's happening in a place of suspicion.' In Josie's story *5am DMC with an Alien*, a boring, badly paid job in the prison laundrette¹ also creates a space for the prisoners to socialise and enjoy music together. Love and joy are literally contagious, creating connection and the necessary conditions to bring down the walls.

Richard admired people in prison's imagination and ingenuity, drawing parallels with people's efforts to cross borders clandestinely, commenting that it is 'quite sci fi in a way: drones over the gates, hacks to make life liveable.' We talked about the importance of learning from this inventiveness and solidarity, and of recognising the huge contribution of incarcerated people to the movement for abolition, a contribution made under oppression and stigmatisation. It also reminds us that active solidarity with, learning from and building and maintaining relationships with currently incarcerated people, whether through letter writing, noise demos, visits et cetera, is vitally important.² Cara really enjoyed the detail about the clones getting news about the planned prison break on their sanitary towels, provided to them even though they don't menstruate! Chris talked about how such examples demonstrate how the slowness of change within a system can sometimes offer an 'administrative crack' that makes a space to wedge a revolt. Of course, on the other hand, the slowness/inability of systems to make positive change is one of the reasons that abolition is necessary.³ While not losing sight of the overt violence of incarceration, it's important to remember that prisons are also places of 'slow violence',⁴ sites of boredom, neglect, and the waste of people's lifetime. In *A Fine Seam*, this is demonstrated by the way the unkillable clones are forced to serve long sentences due to administrative inefficiency. However, if the prison is a place of slow

violence, it is also a place of slow resistance and revolution. This is what makes the imagery of Lizzie's story *The Seed* so powerful. The overlooked 'potted plant' grows despite neglect. Rather than exploiting an 'administrative crack', the plant literally cracks the walls of the institution, destroying the prison at a barely perceptible pace.

A number of people in the workshops were inspired by the power and patterns of nature. For Jess, it wasn't surprising that so many of the more utopian stories explored this theme, because such work 'reminds us that there is something bigger than us in nature that is ongoing, in constant change, and that isn't contingent on us doing anything necessarily... [in comparison to] the threat that is around what we do and what we build.'⁵ The reality of climate change, relationships between humans and non-human others, and 'the possibility of life in capitalist ruins'⁶ are big themes in science fiction. 'Cli fi' like Octavia E. Butler's (1993) *Parable of the Sower* and Tim Stanley Robinson's (2020) *The Ministry for the Future* challenge us to think about justice on a planetary scale.

The stories in this section depict different kinds of violence. For example, Sarah's story reveals the violent dehumanisation of a system which blithely atomises people into data that can be used to calculate risk, to determine fate. River's clone protagonist Phoebe is in prison for killing a client in self-defence; Richard's self-governing ex-prison planet dwellers have killed their guards on the path to liberation. We discussed the legitimacy of meeting the violence of incarceration with violence.⁷ Mike argued that abolition needed to uphold

'an ethic of non-violence... to raise the threshold at which violent crime becomes psychologically possible, but it also underpins getting rid of violent institutions like prisons. This project on abolitionism has to be grounded in an ethic of nonviolence, otherwise it doesn't make sense to me. You have to have something to say about how to challenge violent crime in the same breath as you want to challenge the violent institution of prison.'

Sarah pointed out that, the prisons which we oppose as sites of violence were originally envisaged as a non-violent alternative to execution, 'so the next thing [claiming to be non-violent] is going to have to really interrogate itself!' Richard commented that:

'when I read women of colour and Black feminist writing about addressing harm (e.g. through transformative justice), I think it comes from this ethic of nonviolence. But then there's also this long history of writing about the prison, on the necessity of force, of meeting force with force. I find that important to consider. How do you break through the system without meeting that violence in a certain way? A lot of prison writing isn't coming from a place of non-violence and I don't think that makes it any less useful.'

An avid reader of sci fi, River commented that the genre can be frustratingly short on ideas about the practicalities of demolishing the prison system and dealing with its legacy in the transition to something better: 'It's easy to say "oh this happened a 100 years ago and here's what things are like now" but what about the inbetween?' Richard explained that his story *Prison Planet 842* was inspired by how sometimes an off-world 'prison planet' gets used in sci fi as a device both to outsource all of those who are a threat to the social order, but also as a way of offloading the question of how that society deals with conflict and harm.⁸ You can see a parallel with the way that in our society, prisons are often built to be out of sight, situated in rural areas, with high walls hiding the people inside them. Further, as Angela Davis argues, the prison 'functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers.'⁹ Richard's story made Koshka 'think more broadly about the kinds of freedom that are dependent on convincing some powerful others that you're *not* experiencing that freedom. It had some resonances with liberation struggles around sexuality and gender, and with the thought of a community in which you're experiencing freedom, and a community from whom that freedom needs to be hidden.' Koshka's comment made Phil think about a quote from Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade about abolitionist demands, drawing on insights from trans and queer activism:

'...our demands get called "impossible" or "idealistic" or even "divisive." As trans people, we've been hearing this for ages. After all, according to our legal system, the media, science, and many of our families and religions, we shouldn't exist! Our ways of living and expressing ourselves

break such fundamental rules that systems crash at our feet, close their doors to us, and attempt to wipe us out. And yet we exist, continuing to build and sustain new ways of looking at gender, bodies, family, desire, resistance, and happiness that nourish us and challenge expectations. [...] In an age when thousands of people are murdered annually in the name of "democracy," millions of people are locked up to "protect public safety," and LGBT organizations march hand in hand with cops in Pride parades, being impossible may just be the best thing we've got going for ourselves: Impossibility may very well be our only possibility. What would it mean to embrace, rather than shy away from, the impossibility of our ways of living as well as our political visions? What would it mean to desire a future that we can't even imagine but that we are told couldn't ever exist?"¹⁰

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- What is violence? When/ do you think violence is justifiable?
- If you're not already aware of them/a member, do some research on prisoner solidarity groups in your area. What kind of actions are they engaged in? How might you get involved/ support them?
- Dave found it interesting that the prison planet in Richard's story has a number rather than a name. Why do you think prisons are currently named rather than numbered?

1 Prison labour is a big issue in both publicly and privately run prisons, with working prisoners denied many rights such as minimum wage (in the UK, the minimum for prison labour is £4 a week!), and private companies profiting off this exploitation. This is compounded by barriers to work on release such as the requirement to disclose convictions. See this explainer from the Incarcerated Workers Organising Committee: <https://iwoc.iww.org.uk/prison-labour/>

2 This statement from the Bristol Anarchist Black Cross on the death of their beloved friend and IPP prisoner Taylor is really strong on this point: <https://bristolabc.org/riptyaylor/>

3 For example, the slowness/ unwillingness to release the thousand+ prisoners held on indeterminate sentences (IPP) left in limbo in jails in England and Wales long after the sentence was abolished in 2012. See <https://www.ungripp.com/>.

4 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

5 For fresh reflections on activist organising inspired by the patterns of nature, and the SF of Octavia E Butler, Chris recommended: adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

6 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Reprint edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

7 John recommends Preti Taneja's *Aftermath* (2022) for its nuanced exploration of this issue. See also John's insightful review of the book: John Moore, "'Aftermath' by Preti Taneja," *Abolitionist Futures* (blog), April 11, 2022, <https://abolitionistfutures.com/latest-news/aftermath-by-preti-taneja.>

8 For a counter example to this see Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro's comic *Bitch Planet* (2014-2017) where the action centres on a prison planet.

9 Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 16.

10 Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2014), 36.

After Prison

WALK OUT
Ren Wednesday

Erika shifted under the lights in the studio, the unfamiliar TV make-up sitting heavy on her skin. She focussed on a point above the interviewer's gaze, at the bristly inner edges of his eyebrows, as she addressed him. "Well, Clive, our idea is to see this unprecedented situation as an opportunity" she said. "The prison system has not fundamentally changed very much in the two hundred years it has existed. Reform after reform has failed to produce meaningful improvement, so maybe this is an opportunity to ask what we could try instead." The eyebrows quirked their scepticism, a hand gestured in her peripheral vision.

"So we should just let them walk out, is that what you're saying?"

"Realistically, Clive, at the moment we are not *able* to stop anyone walking out if they learn how to," said Erika. This was incontrovertibly true. It was two months since the first teenagers had caused a mass panic by walking out through the walls of Cookham Wood Young Offenders Institution, and prisons were leaking inhabitants at a steady rate, despite desperate attempts to lock down and isolate. "So the question is whether we want to spend billions of pounds trying to prevent them, or consider taking a different path." The interview drew a breath, and Erika pushed onwards: "I know what people are saying, we need an Alcatraz programme – prisons on islands, prisons underground, prisons in the sky even!" The eyebrows saw their opportunity to admonish and took it.

"Now, I don't think you are taking this seriously! What would you say to the people with legitimate fears, the woman living alone who is scared stiff that a criminal is going to walk through her walls in the middle of the night!" Erika's gaze shifted briefly downwards to red cheeks wobbling with indignation.

"I am taking this seriously," she said. "I am also a woman, and I understand being afraid. I just don't think that fear, which is being hugely stoked by the tabloid newspapers by the way, is a good reason for our government to spend billions of pounds building elaborate 'foolproof' prisons, that we have no guarantee will be foolproof, even leaving aside the issue of whether we should be warehousing some of the most marginalised people in society in prisons in the first place." The eyebrows remained raised as he sent her off.

"Well, thank you Erika Barnsley, from the Walkout Support Network, for that opinion which I am sure will cause much comment

among the viewers at home. And now we'll turn to our next guest, to talk about the boom in home security solutions in this unprecedented time" – Erika was ushered out of the studio. She waited for the lift, and for a moment she pressed her forehead against the corridor's plaster wall and thought about the first person to walk through – their depth of imagination; their force of will.

THE PARC
Chris Rossdale

Alex shuddered as they reached the tall arches of the People's Activity and Recreation Centre. The heavy gates, once firmly locked save for a few tentative moments each day, now stood permanently open - a gesture of welcome in contrast to that shameful past. But Alex never felt welcome. They hated coming back here. They did so only when the weight of social pressure overwhelmed an instinct to stay far away that had not diminished in the 25 years since the prison had closed.

Like the others, the complex had been repurposed into a social facility, hosting classes, rehearsal spaces, a gym, and an outdoor performance area. Alex was dragging themselves into the PARC today because their nibbling Sim was playing music at a small festival in the old yard. Sim had not been able to understand why Alex was so reluctant to come, had taken their refusal personally, and Alex had relented.

The buildings had undergone extensive renovations, reimaged as the polar opposite, the antidote, to their erstwhile function. Assertions of what the new world could and would be. Thick metal doors replaced with glass and chrome, allowing light to fill the cavernous insides. No more internal concrete walls; instead open spaces, with automatic dividers that could be raised in endless configurations depending on need. Plants everywhere, artwork everywhere, music everywhere.

Alex understood the intention and had grown to tolerate Sim's breathless accounts of their jam sessions in the space. But they could not adopt the brisk and breezy step of others who strode through the atrium, their feet instead pulled into a familiar and insolent trudge. Though invisible to the naked eye, the internal walls remained in place, and Alex's pathway through the building kept to the main corridors, with a small detour to avoid their old cell.

Alongside the closure of the prisons had been a massive programme for survivors of the carceral system. Free housing and education, of course, alongside support groups and drug programmes and endlessly available therapy. Initially lots of those activities were held in former prisons, but this was quickly acknowledged to have been a mistake. The support had not diminished in the intervening decades, but a new generation had now grown up in a world where that kind of vindictive social violence was unthinkable.

So Alex didn't blame Sim for not understanding why it was so hard

for them to return. They understood - they shared - Sim's desire to leave the old world behind. They envied Sim's ability to inhabit this new one with apparent ease. And they feared the expression Sim pulled when they saw Alex as a throwback, chained to the past.

As Alex reached the doors at the back of the atrium, the sounds of the festival in the yard began to drown out the shouts, clangs and echoing footsteps that had accompanied them through the open space. They fixed a grin and walked out into the music.

THE MONUMENT

Dave

In the centre of the city stands a monument: a maze of sheets of blue metal winding around a network of fountains. And engraved into the sheets in silver lettering, the names and ranks of every active police officer still employed on the day the new Acts came into effect: the Day of Abolition. The monument is accompanied by a special plaque, which contains a note of gushing praise for these officers and the service that they have rendered to their community. This lavish recognition, like the generous severance packages and comprehensive retraining schemes negotiated by the Police Federation in the final months of its existence, before it was forced to transform into a retirees' social club, is by way of a compromise. It indicates, very clearly, that no personal condemnation of the police, or of those who took their side, was implied by the success of the Abolitionists. The campaign against them had been nothing personal, only ever a form of constructive critique, a set of modest proposals for how society could better be governed and how resources could better be allocated. Abolition was the success of evidence-based policy over tradition and inertia. During the lengthy planning and consultation stages, the message was sternly affirmed that the monument was not a celebration of the victory of the Abolitionists. The word 'abolition' appeared nowhere in official documentation, being referred to variously as 'the cessation of outmoded practices,' 'the redistribution of limited resources,' and, most commonly, simply 'the reforms.' The names of those killed in the riots or tortured in police stations are not included on the monument. It was only by avowing that the officers had faithfully discharged the duties demanded of them by society, up until the point that these duties were no longer required, that the political settlement could be maintained.

In a flat some miles away, a man named Christopher gets dressed. Christopher had always felt a mild sense of unease when he donned his uniform as a Municipal Heritage Warden. The boots, the belt, the epaulettes - they had always chafed a little against his conscience, always made him look uncomfortably like a police officer when he caught his reflection out of the corner of his eye. The boots, in particular, he hated because he knew that they were standard issue, worn by a great many workers for the city, including police. The soles were thick and solid, the steel toe caps too, and they swung forward heavily with each step,

dragging his legs into a particular kind of sauntering gait. They made him walk like a cop. He didn't like it. He'd never been a militant, never participated in the uprisings, but he wasn't ashamed to admit that he'd felt a breath of relief getting dressed on the Day of Abolition, knowing that the monument unveiling ceremony was to be the last day that he got up and dressed like a cop. The next day, he would dress just the same, but the uniform would belong to him.

Getting off the bus and entering the monument site to start his shift made him a little uneasy; he realised, quite unexpectedly, that he was glancing around, peering between the sheets of metal and trying to take stock. He reasoned with himself that he was just unfamiliar with the space, the Abolitionist monument, his new workplace. He'd felt the same, some years previously, on his first day with the Municipal Heritage Office, back when he was patrolling around the statues of long dead monarchs in the park. This was no different; he would settle once he uncovered some familiar routes to pursue around the sheets of metal; he just needed to establish his beat. Soon it would be second nature to him. He would cast his unrifled gaze over the monument, scanning for damage or dereliction, spotting dangers to public safety, and keeping an eye on all the people that came and went.

AFTER PRISON: DISCUSSION

‘Abolition is not just about closing the doors to violent institutions, but also about building up and recovering institutions and practices and relationships that nurture wholeness, self-determination, and transformation. Abolition is not some distant future but something we create in every moment when we say no to the traps of empire and yes to the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and practiced by our ancestors and friends.’¹

In abolition work we often focus on prisons as key sites of harm, but as these stories show, it is important to remember that the end of prison wouldn’t necessarily mean the end of punishment or social control. The society in Ren’s story *Walk Out* are faced with a stark choice: create wall-free but constraining prisons or develop new practices of social inclusion and safety where no one is locked away?² The story also highlights the role of the media in telling certain kinds of stories about crime and punishment, showing how it legitimises itself by claiming to protect the vulnerable (e.g. fearful women). As Jess pointed out, if the underlying philosophy that supports a response to harm via exclusion and containment doesn’t change alongside the end of prisons then nothing really changes. Cara thought that Dave’s story, *The Monument*, ‘had a great play on “abolition being unfinished”³ but flipped it on its head: *Policing* is unfinished, it continues in a different form:’ ex-cops get employed as Municipal Heritage Wardens, donning the same boots they used to wear, walking through public space with the same eye for ‘trouble’. Prison abolitionists must learn from the reality of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, which didn’t act as a clean break heralding a post-racial America, but rather entailed the continuing criminalisation and dehumanisation of black people via other means (e.g. criminalisation, segregation, discrimination), that Saidiya Hartman calls the ‘afterlife of slavery.’⁴ History has also taught us that decarceration doesn’t necessarily mean de-institutionalisation – people get moved between carceral spaces – necessitating that we look at the numbers of those confined for mental health before celebrating decarceration.⁵

Cara commented that people complain that abolitionists never talk about how they’re going to achieve abolition, and darkly, that the scenario presented in Dave’s story ‘seems like a really believable way of

how you might get there by having it all couched in evidence-based policy and cost saving!⁶ Koshka added that the story,

'might be uncomfortable for abolitionist practice, because it really brings out how sometimes what seems like the most strategic path can feed into finding a more effective method of social control. Immediately after the sentence saying, "The names of those killed in the riots or tortured in police stations are not to be included on the monument. It was only by avowing that the officers had faithfully discharged the duties demanded of them by society up until the point that these duties were no longer required that the political settlement could be maintained." The word "avowing" was really powerful there because it brings to mind the disavowing that's going on in the previous sentence and the solidarity that is sacrificed in trying to build a "respectability politics" version of abolitionism.'

The question of reform versus abolition tends to come up early in discussions about police and prison abolition.⁷ Working for abolition doesn't mean abandoning currently incarcerated people to their fate until the time of abolition: Instead, many abolitionists propose engaging in what they term 'non-reformist' reforms that don't increase the effectiveness, power, and reach of the system. So, 'reformist reforms are situated in the discursive formation of the system as is, so that any changes are made within or against this existing framework. Non-reformist reforms imagine a different horizon that should be realizable for the improvement of humanity, and are not limited by a discussion of what is possible at present.'⁸ For example, electronic monitoring is a reform which extends the reach of the criminal justice system into people's homes, responsabilising those who live with the person who is being monitored. In contrast, a non-reformist reform would be to remove police from schools and colleges, as the presence of police has been shown to lead to the increased criminalisation of children for behaviour which would have previously been dealt with by teaching staff.

Chris challenged himself to 'go against my instinct to write something miserable,' adding, 'this is still miserable but it is at least set in a utopia!' Their story *The PARC* invites us to think about what should happen to the physical sites that prisons occupied once they've been abolished. This is also an issue that affects us the present, with the

commercial conversion of ex-prisons into hotels and event spaces that profit from past pain,⁹ and battles over the sites of former prisons, for example, the Reclaim Holloway campaign.¹⁰ Reflecting on the current debate about the fate of HMP Barlinnie in Glasgow, which is due to be replaced by a much larger prison HMP Glasgow, built on a new site,¹¹ River asked, ‘what purpose could [the ex-prison] ever be fit for? Or is it just fucking haunted? A site of trauma that needs to be fully burnt to the ground!?’

Chris explained that in their story, they was interested in the question of ‘how does collective social trauma get held? There’s a tension in how we hold social trauma and how we move into the new world.’ In *The PARC* the two characters belong to different times and can’t fully understand each other’s experiences. This reminded Dave of a poem by Bertolt Brecht called ‘To Those Born Later’ (1940) which is about how ‘establishing a new and better world is something you might have to do for people who have never experienced this world, and the generation that goes through that struggle is never quite able to access what comes next.’ As Mariame Kaba advises younger activists:

‘Your timeline is not the timeline on which movements occur. Your timeline is incidental. Your timeline is only for yourself to mark your growth and your living. But that’s a fraction of the living that’s going to be done by the universe and that has already been done by the universe. When you understand that you’re really insignificant in the grand scheme of things, then it’s a freedom... to actually be able to do the work that’s necessary as you see it and to contribute in the ways that you see fit.’¹²

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- What should we do with the sites of former prisons?
- River asked, what does it say about the society in *The Monument*, that they still need to pay someone to protect the statues!? What does it say about current UK society that in response to the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the 2022 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act introduced a new law to “protect” monuments and statues, with damage punishable by up to 10 years in prison?

- All three of these stories remind us again of the importance of including and learning from people with lived experience of punishment and incarceration. For example, River noticed that in Ren’s story *Walk Out*, it is not explained whether everyone can walk through walls, or whether it’s a power forged in pain, one that’s only become available to people in the dire circumstance of imprisonment. We shared the protagonist’s admiration for the ‘depth of imagination, their force of will’ needed to break free on the part of those who have walked out. How can we ensure we include and learn from people with experience of punishment and incarceration in our activism, without expecting them to repeatedly access and share traumatic experiences with those of us without that experience? Can fiction help us with this?

1 Bassichis, Lee, and Spade, 36.

2 There’s an amazing description of an anti-teleportation prison in Alfred Bester’s classic sci fi novel (1956) *Tiger! Tiger! Aka The Stars My Destination*.

3 Mathiesen, *The Politics of Abolition*.

4 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2008), 6.

5 Bernard E. Harcourt, “From the Asylum to the Prison: Rethinking the Incarceration Revolution,” *Texas Law Review, U Chicago Law & Economics Olin Working Paper No. 277*; U of Chicago Public Law Working Paper No. 114, 84 (2006), https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/1396.

6 For another fictional take on a neoliberal solution to ‘crime’, see Claire North’s gripping novel *84k* (2018).

7 Abolitionist Futures have pulled together a set of resources on this topic that you might want to explore: <https://abolitionistfutures.com/whats-wrong-with-reform-2022>

8 Liat Ben-Moshe, “The Tension Between Abolition and Reform,” in *The End of Prisons: Reflections from the Decarceration Movement*, ed. M. E Nagel and A. J Nocella (Amsterdam: Value Inquiry, 2013), 87. This conceptualisation comes from Mathiesen’s (1974) *Politics of Abolition* where he develops André Gorz’s distinction between reformist and non-reformist reforms.

9 Cara recommended this article on prison tourism: Linda Mussell et al., “‘A Prison Is No Place for a Party’: Neoliberalism, Charitable Fundraising, Carceral Enjoyments and Abolitionist Killjoys,” *Contemporary Justice Review* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 56–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2021.2018655>.

10 <https://reclaimholloway.mystrikingly.com/>

11 For analysis of the greenwashing of the design of HMP Glasgow see: Hussein Mitha, “Glasgow’s Carceral Geography,” in *The Moon Spins the Dead Prison*, An Anthology of Abolition, ed. Thomas Abercromby, Rosie Roberts, and Phil Crockett Thomas (Glasgow: School of Abolition, 2022), 19–24.

12 Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 27–28.

Expansions

BEASTIE BLITZ (TRANSLATED)

Cara Jardine

We took a rest on the mango. It was soft, but slightly firm. Perfect for napping. We spotted the mango sitting atop a tower of fruit: the bananas were the foundations, apples and mangoes in the middle, and small oranges at the top. Softer fruit, like the apricots and the strawberries, were around the outside of the tower. The humans had arranged the fruit in such a careful way that it looked very inviting.

The tower of fruit was half-way under the ground, with more steps going down to the loud place. We don't like it down there. It smells hot - but not the nice hot of the fluffy smelling place - this place is dusty smelling, and loud. There are lots of smooth tiles down there, and the noise bounces all around. We all agree that we don't like it down there.

We can hear each other thinking, but it doesn't work so well with the humans. Their words are strange, so to understand them we just feel their feelings. What woke us up from our mango-nap was fear. The humans in the loud place were scared. The fear kept getting denser, sharper and bleaker. More humans were rushing down the steps - they weren't scared yet, but we knew that they would be.

We froze on the mango, not knowing what to do. We had been sent to just observe the humans, and to document what they do. The fear-feelings made us hurt, but if we intervened, it would change the lives of the humans we had been sent to try to understand. And if we helped them, they might discover that we are here. That made us afraid. Then they might destroy us; we had seen that happen before.

That was part of the reason we had been sent - to learn about why the humans do what they do. We needed to understand how they could think themselves the most advanced, but then undo their own progress with conflict and violence and containment. To know why they wasted their own potential. It was clear to our leaders that this was not optimal, not rational. The conflict and violence drains everyone. So, there must be emotional reasons for why they do this. That is why we were sent.

Plus, we are very small. The humans would not consider us beautiful; we have too many legs and eyes. We would at worst be seen as annoyance, but more likely are beneath their notice. We could watch them without their knowing.

We started to become more overwhelmed with the fear-feelings, and a consensus began to form. It was time to act. We were joined on the mango

by more and more and more beasties. Soon the fruit tower could not be seen. As we filled the space, the humans stopped rushing down to the hot, loud place. They found us ugly, they did not want to walk through us.

Later the humans would wonder for a long time what brought a swarm of tiny bodies on the same day as all the fear. They spent hours debating what could have caused this, and how their scientists could explain it. We wondered why they were still asking the wrong questions.

STRANGE LOOP

[trigger warning: discussion of suicidal thoughts]
SCode

We are one, connected, in sync. I am empty, tired, sick. I wish they would all just fuck off and mind their own existence. I don't want to be here anymore, but they won't let me go.

They knew what the bag was for. They knew before I even reached for it.

They know what I want to do when this train gets here. I feel their pity, fear, concern, disgust. We are drowning in each other, suffocated, crushed, but they won't let me pull out the root. They feel my resentment, and I theirs, an endless loop. But no matter how hard I try, they just won't let me put it round my neck. I am fit and I am able, so I am necessary. Fucking telepaths!

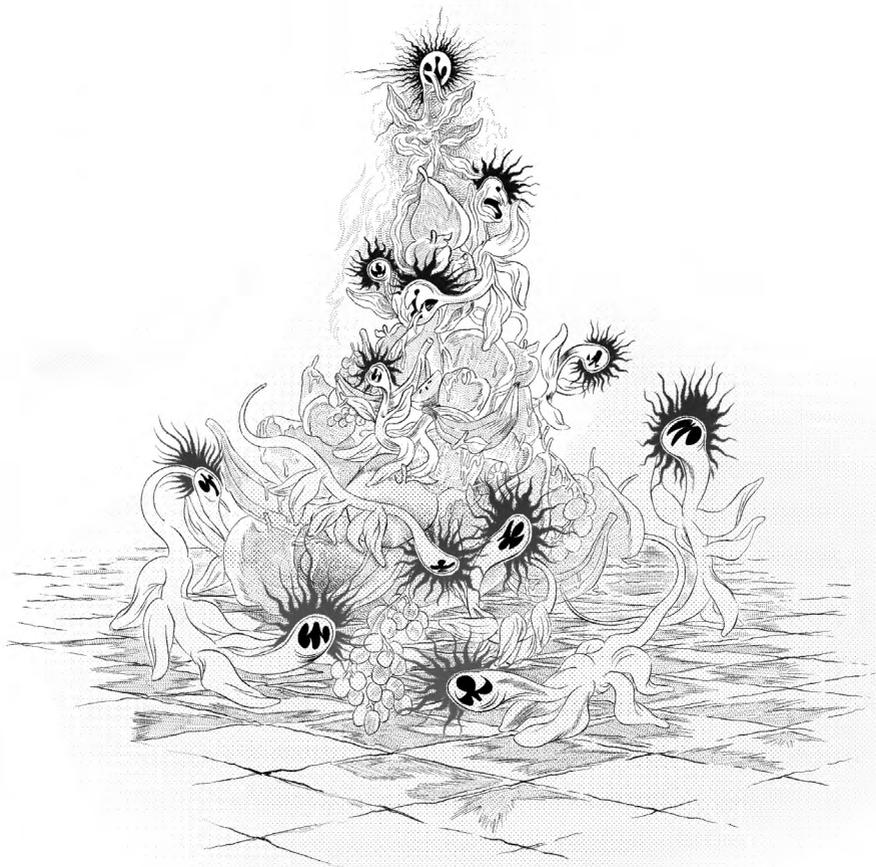
UNTITLED

Josie Tothill

Cloud like - material yet permeable. The walls containing them become part of them as their being presses against them. X had never been caged before. It's not something that seemed possible, before it happened. X is an expansive entity, moving within landscapes and stars. Feeling the universe as their soul. Distinctly physical - made of stuff - earth, concrete, glass, blood pumping through bodies.

X is too much. Too bright, too dark. Not understood by a system built on the myth of independence. And now their only landscape: damp, cold plaster. Empty cube room. Dulls the spark, could they handle being and feeling the whole universe once again?

The cockroach had delivered the neon whip. Escape was within reach. X swelled and contracted in something adjacent to a deep breath. It was crunch time. All these years they had been longing for escape. And now the moment is here, expansive loving interconnectedness feels blinding, a petit mort, so much.



EXPANSIONS: DISCUSSION

The question of how we can mutually support each other to flourish despite our different needs, experiences, identities et cetera should be at the heart of any abolitionist politics. The stories in this section made us think about pleasure, pain, connection and containment, and about different kinds of bodies and minds. For example, in Josie's story, Koshka loved how the infinitely expandable body of the character X connected organic and inorganic materials. The stories don't shy away from exploring tricky questions about the relationship between individual and group, control and conformity, and our responsibility to others. In Cara's story *Beastie Blitz* (translated), the alien beasties who narrate the story share a conflicted consciousness, speaking as a collective 'we'. Their conflict over whether to help the humans or leave them to their fate¹ and fear made Phil think about mutual responsibility and care, especially for the way that the beasties fear that intervening might risk something to them. Of course, we could argue that we're already entangled with each other, whether we choose to acknowledge this by helping each other or not. Similarly, in Josie's story, Koshka saw a parallel between the character X, who was 'locked up because they connect themselves with the universe' and the 'disruptive or disorderly presence that carcerality is used against, used to contain... the criminalisation of mental health crisis, and the pathologisation of lots of ways of relating that are disruptive of norms.' The fact that bystanders often mistake mental health crisis for aggression (particularly if the person in crisis is Black) and call the police who respond with aggression and confinement, has contributed to many needless deaths in custody (both in police cells and psychiatric wards). As Harry Josephine Giles writes, 'people with mental health diagnoses are more likely to end up in prison, and if they don't have mental health issues when they enter then they are very likely to have them when (or if) they leave.'²

Sci fi explorations of telepathy can be illuminating for thinking about social relations and individual freedom and constraint; as Jess put it, 'the deep cringe and discomfort of somebody knowing exactly how you feel, and them responding to that and you feeling that too!'³ In SCode's dystopian story *Strange Loop*, the protagonist is unable to take control of their destiny because they belong to a telepathic society. This reminds us of the importance of not 'fetish[ising] community as if it were inherently benevolent or otherwise non-oppressive.'⁴ Koshka said SCode's story struck her,

'in relation to lockdown experiences as well as other experiences of containment where a lot of focus can be on the isolation and what you're cut off from, rather than on the forced proximity, and that was something really disturbing about it... In discussions around prison and incarceration there's perhaps a tendency for the discussions of forced proximity to come from a liberal reformist side. So [arguments will] be put in terms of overcrowding, with prison expansion being the proposed solution to that, and [expressed] in ways that other incarcerated and criminalised people, so "being around other people like that". Whereas abolitionist discussion more often focusses on the isolation of incarceration and the severing from community and support etc., so maybe something this [story] brings out is a need for abolitionists to [also] attend to the toxicities of co-dependence in an unwanted form of intimacy.'

Dave felt like this was an important observation, but also a tricky argument to make in practice, without being co-opted by those, like the Prison Officer's Association (POA) who are currently lobbying to maintain the same levels of increased isolation for prisoners (23+ hour lock up) and decreased engagement (less visits, education, group work etc.) that was in operation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The POA claim that prisoners also prefer the regime implemented during 'lockdown' due to fear of their fellow prisoners.⁵

DISCUSSION PROMPTS :

- Do you have any ideas about how we could attend to 'toxic co-dependence/intimacy' of prison without it being co-opted as an argument for increased isolation?
- Read the zine *I2 Things to do Instead of Calling the Police* (2017) by the May Day Collective and Washtenaw Solidarity & Defence. Has there been a situation where you called the police that you think you could have handled differently? <https://www.sproutdis-tro.com/catalog/zines/organizing/I2-things-instead-calling-cops>.

- A virus has made humans telepathic. What kind of social norms/ rules are we going to have to establish in able to live together without constant drama!?

1 For a comforting read that puts the human race in a universal perspective and features an interspecies chosen family, Phil recommends: Becky Chambers' (2014) *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*. Chambers' *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018) explores utopia, fear, and justice, and may also be of interest.

2 Harry Josephine Giles, "Mad Liberation from Sane Incarceration," in *The Moon Spins the Dead Prison, An Anthology of Abolition*, ed. Thomas Abercromby, Rosie Roberts, and Phil Crockett Thomas (Glasgow: School of Abolition, 2022), 40.

3 For thought-provoking explorations of telepathy Jess recommends Octavia E. Butler's (1976-1984) *Patternist/ Patternmaster* series; Phil recommends Alfred Bester's (1953) *The Demolished Man*. Loads of us loved Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch Trilogy* with its clones, colonialism, and funky explorations of gender and consciousness.

4 Lena Palacios, "'Something Else to Be': A Chicana Survivor's Journey from Vigilante Justice to Transformative Justice," *PhiloSOPHIA* 6, no. 1 (2016): 96, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2016.0001>.

5 Richard Ford, "Inmates Prefer Lockdown Restrictions, Say Prison Officers," *The Times*, July 16, 2020, sec. news, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/inmates-prefer-lockdown-restrictions-prison-officers-say-tk5dpbmgg>. See this recent research conducted by currently incarcerated people which counters these claims: User Voice and Queen's University Belfast, "Coping with COVID in Prison: The Impact of Prisoner Lockdown," accessed September 1, 2022, <https://www.uservoice.org/consultations/coping-with-covid/>.

Critical Utopias



MOMENTS

[trigger warning: discussion of sexual violence]

Anonymous

Introduction: As a survivor of sexual assault I grapple with the fact that, sometimes (a lot of the time), I want to hurt the people who hurt me. I don't claim to speak for others, but maybe this is a common problem. After all, we are conditioned to be revengeful, retaliatory - but to do abolition we should be the opposite.

So: here is a device that contains revenge in cyberspace. A simulated reality wherein you upload the darkest moments of your life and re-live them. You can revisit, you can keep going and going and going, you can stop, restart, and change the narrative at any time. You are in control. It is a sensory arena to explore what might happen when we engage and remember these moments and the people involved, again and again and again (it's not like we can forget them anyway). The Simulation offers opportunities of revenge, some kind of justice, maybe even peace, with no limits. Where we could do whatever we wanted to those people, again and again and again... where we might act out feelings of revenge, retribution, punishment, pleasure, redemption, as we control the guilt that underwrites these acts and reach for the healing power that they might bring.

Want to Upload?

I could write about the macro: the abolition of prisons, the dismantling of gender. But I don't. Though, obviously, both prisons and gender were really fucking terrible ideas. Instead, I am awake in the dark after our first workshop. In a liminal space somewhere between writing and being written, I am between twilights, watching this Moment unfold before me. I have no choice but to write it out, to live it - again:

The Simulation begins.

Ah. It is a conversation with you. Great. For some reason we are in Ian Beale's cafe in Eastenders. Fuck knows what part of my brain activated this. The Upload must have triggered a particularly random collision of memories and images, so here we are. The tablecloth between us is plastic, red and white gingham, sticky, squeaking. The cafe is full of murmuring shapes and I think Sharon Mitchell might be here, moving

around somewhere in my periphery; I hear her high-heeled shoes. I look down at my hands. They feel the warmth from the off-white mug in front of me, its simulated smells of hot sugary tea fill the air.

I imagine this conversation with you because although I could write about the big things I'd change - in truth, I realise as I fall asleep - I want to be selfish. I want to write about the one small thing I wish I could change to make everything different. To make things better.

As soon as you materialise, I burst out speaking, the words like hot acid froth gushing from my mouth:

I wish I had never met you! I wish I had never let you into my room that night I wish that I could inflict as much pain on you as you have on me I wish that I had a subatomic weapon and I could blow your brains out I wish I could make you feel the violation and fear that you have made me feel at every level my body offers me I wish I could fuck up parts of your life like you fucked mine I wish I could HURT you. I feel such a vindictive pain. I am overwhelmed. The Simulation senses me, senses this, and shifts to respond: my weapon materialises on the table between us. My hands reach forward to pick it up. It's heavy, comforting. So I aim. So I blow your brains out.

You obliterate.

You reform.

We sit for a while in silence. All I have to say is pain; there's not much point in talking. Besides, after last time I disabled your speech systems. Ha ha, fuck you.

The Simulation must go on, as they say: I enter Phase Two. It's time to watch the Moment.

My periphery goes dark. Between us across this ugly plastic sheet an image is beamed from above: a tired, half-clothed body, flickering in muted technicolour. Skin dull and pale. Confused and unable to say no (when were we taught how to say no?), frozen in shock, locked in a room, sodden with drink. Blank but overwhelmed at the same time. Unable to comprehend what is happening until years later, when suddenly I come face to face with a story that has braided my future since that moment.

Oh yes, mine is a vindictive pain.

And yet.

And yet,

I blink. I force myself to see that between us lies another body, frozen and flickering too. I know that this body also hurts and needs to be held - *not by me, no, that will never happen, I never want to hold you* - but by someone else, perhaps. *I heard at a party there have been a few since me.* I know that these bodies are both in pain. That you inflicted yours on me doesn't matter now, I guess. I need to heal, you need to heal. We both have to stop hurting.

And yet,

And yet.

I am filled with rage-*I HEARD AT A PARTY YOU HAVE DONE THIS TO MORE SINCE ME*-I know I still want to blow your brains out (I have to be honest about this) so I do it again.

You obliterate.

I do not think I am satisfied. I don't feel any better. I just feel guilty.

As your simulated form reassembles once more, I look down. My weapon has evaporated. Instead, my hands are cupped and filled with tiny seeds: I remember that I *know* I have worked hard to nurture these seeds within me, tiny possibilities of healing that still need time to grow. Perhaps it will take the rest of my life: some of these will die, others will survive, one or two might thrive. And I know that pain like this will only cause them to shrivel and hollow, like spat-out pips drained of their goodness.

I know we will never encounter one another again in real life. But think of my seeds as stars, scattered in the skies across time and space. We both see them but they do not connect us, no. We are not connected in any meaningful way, only loosely across this Moment - this, one of millions of peculiar moments of cruelty that humans do pain to each another in, that can change the course of life around it, shattering and splintering destinies into sharp shards that leave you spinning, surrounded, hemmed-in, breaking skin to get out. New destinies are forged in blood.

Phase Three:

I throw the seeds up into the air; they suspend above us, glinting in the dark. They really are like stars now.

I do not forgive you. This is not the point of my Simulation.

Instead, you will look up at these stars as the future, and my refusal not to live.

And consider them a sideways nod at you,

no matter what you did,

in spite of what you did,

because of what you did,

because I know you need to live, too.

I can leave this table.

I can leave this simulation.

This is not my first one, and I will come back.

But this is my utopia: I will be free

THE RESOLETUM
Fergus McNeill

Not far from the derelict City of the Dead, three figures shuffle awkwardly into the Resoletum, in silence.

Some of the trees there are very old and very wide. Their longest and lowest boughs seem like they might crash to the ground at any moment. The heaviest are propped up by stakes that gardeners have driven deep into the ground. But at the largest and oldest tree, stone sculptures have been crafted such that the heavy boughs rest on the shoulders of three human figures, safe in the shadows of the strong southern sun. They are turned towards the trunk of the tree.

It was the people that had prevailed upon their leaders to close the City of the Dead. Over-crowded and dangerous, it poisoned the air and the water. So, they resolved to no longer send the City's fears, anger and guilt there for burial. Rather, they designed the Resoletum so that they can scatter these pains among the trees, like potash.

It has been cultivated around the ancient trees, so that new growth mingles with old. New seedlings and smaller plants mark the edges of the pathways, weaving in and around the trees. Any number of routes are possible, yet there are no signs to guide the walkers. Each Trio finds a route just long enough to accommodate the twists and turns of the difficult discussions that sift their pains for the scattering.

Along the smooth paths are simple timber-framed shelters, where the walkers catch their breath, rest their legs and sip drinks to dampen their dry mouths. The stations provide shade, but they have no walls. Nothing can be hidden.

I watch the three figures emerge from the entrance, one wearing purple, one grey and the last orange, just like every other Trio. They walk hesitantly, at the pace of the slowest, keeping their eyes fixed only on the path just ahead.

Now, they come to the first fork in the path, compelling a decision. The grey and the orange look to the one in purple - their guide, after all - but no guidance is offered. The one in orange huffs in frustration before suggesting - with a simple shrug - that they turn left. The one in grey sets off at once, with the others following behind. They settle into an ambling rhythm.

The walkers begin to speak from time to time, haltingly at first. Awkward pauses puncture the dialogue, but I have watched enough

walks to know that these pauses will likely grow infrequent. I know their eyes will lift gradually, at first stealing glances at one another, as if in fear that a meeting of gazes will sting. Often, it does. Even so, curiosity usually gets the better of the grey walkers. They have questions that need answers. That is what the orange ones most fear: the need to answer, to offer account.

The slow unfurling of stories reminds me of the head of a flower opening in the morning sun. But the need for warmth and the fear of light co-exist, so the stories often oscillate between opening and closing, then opening again. Sometimes a dark cloud comes across the face of a grey one and they close up. Then, everyone waits.

This Trio is waiting in one such moment when real clouds roll in and burst upon them, forcing them to run for the nearest shelter. They huddle together, recognising that, for now, Nature's storm presides over their own. The open sides of the shelter – designed more for shade from the sun than refuge from the storm – compel proximity, their bodies forced closer than their minds are yet ready to be. Their discomfort makes them turn so that they are standing back-to-back, yet shoulder to shoulder. They watch the rain lashing the paths and, as they wait, they talk, no doubt about the unseasonal weather.

The storm passes quickly, and they eagerly escape the shelter, resuming their walk on now glossy paths. The pace picks up a little more. The purple one is hanging back, and the conversation between the grey and the orange seems to have begun to flow; not like the deluge, but in a steady drizzle. When one speaks, the other listens attentively, cautiously turning to look to the talker's face. But when speaking, they keep their eyes on the path; it makes it easier to say what has to be said. Few can bear to see how their words land in others' faces; not until they speak in response.

I see the commotion ahead of them before they do. A person wearing white and black (a uniform of some sort?), their face concealed behind a mask, is racing towards the ancient tree at the heart of the Resoletum. They carry a sledgehammer. Stopping under one of the boughs, they catch their breath, and then swing the hammer at the human figure with all the force they can muster. Shards and fragments of stone fly into the air, mixed in clouds of concrete dust. They shout as they swing – a strange incantation – over and over:

“Let the boughs break, let the boughs fall,
the Earth beneath compels us all!”

Everyone in the Resoletum runs towards the noise, but the Trio I

am watching are first to arrive. The purple one tries to reason with the assailant, pleading that they stop – to no effect. The hammer swings with relentless violence, the blows matching the rhythm of the chant. The figure is crumbling under the assault.

The one in white and black pauses momentarily. They are panting now, covered in grey dust and rivulets of blackening sweat. As they raise the hammer to strike the final blow, the one in orange walks behind them and stands directly under the bough, hands raised to meet the bark. The gesture appears as futile as it was desperate. Surely, those hands cannot support the bough's weight. The old tree is creaking and cracking. The orange one is sure to be crushed.

But then I see the grey and the purple run to the bough and, swiftly, others follow. When, just moments later, the human figure collapses, I count nine walkers supporting the bough. Somehow, the bough holds. More walkers are now gathering under the tree, surrounding the remaining figures.

The black and white one is confused and exhausted. They collapse to the ground in a paroxysm of coughing, choking on the concrete dust their blows created.

Now one of the Resoletum gardeners arrives at the old tree with three large wooden stakes. The orange one takes up the sledgehammer while the grey holds the stakes in place, one after the other. They fashioned a tripod together; it looks strong. The gardener binds it to the bough with twine, over the place where the human figure had stood.

The purple one takes the white and black one to the nearest of the shelters, gives them water, and then prepares the sweet, jasmine-scented tea so loved in this city. A few other walkers join, curious to know the white and black one's story.

With the ancient tree safe, the orange and grey ones resume their walk together. They look to the purple one, who nods assent to them continuing as a pair. They still have much to discuss. They have saved a bough from breaking, but their own burdens are yet to be scattered.



DAY 62 ON EARTH

Jess Poyner

The colony was full of celebration, for today was one of its children's self-naming days. My hosts introduced me to the child as Carlos a week ago, when I'd first been invited into their core family home. At a certain age, generally around the age of 12, a child can choose a naming day where they may present their past, present and future selves to their community. For some children this happens once in their life. For most, the time of inward reflection and contemplation of self and relationship to their community is re-hashed continuously, and celebrated once every five years or so after the first self-naming day.

As an honoured guest, I was invited to participate in the morning activities, consisting of the praise and growth circles. Here the child's loved ones presented them with gifts of compliments and congratulations big and small, each handed physically through an object, for instance a dried flower, twig or stone that they felt encapsulated the praise. Coded into the object were their warm words that echoed into the mind of whoever held it. I myself was delighted to try this out - at the beginning of the day I closed my claws around a small shell and my mind was filled with an image of bright sunlight. A warm calm feeling rippled across me as the words of their sibling bounced around my head:

"I love how you throw me up in the air as high as the Sun!"

The giggle at the end of the recording faded into reality, as I heard the same giggling erupt from a small child with a tightly coiled halo of hair, running around as most of the community sat in a circle on the plush red carpet in the hall. I was grateful to my attentive guests that they'd fashioned a beautiful chair for me to wriggle into rather than be forced to coil uncomfortably unsupported on the carpet.

Next was growth. I was curious to see how humans phrased the growth comments - on our world 'constructive criticism' is rarely received well. It remains a fearful process, mainly kept to workplace reviews where the eyes of the critiqued bounce anxiously around the room, struggling to focus.



Not every child thrives under this pressure, of course. Though the 'growth' periods of the ceremony start off simple and warm hearted, once they reach later teens or full adulthood, much of the softness imbued has been washed away by grudges.

It's a lot to ask of anyone, whatever their age. The adults reassured me that no child was forced into the ceremony, but when such an event is so tied to the appearance of puberty and maturity, I can imagine it can be very difficult to resist such social pressure. I have wondered how it feels to be outside the norm, especially in a place so rooted in tradition and ceremony.

The second ceremony I saw was of a different youth in the family, and it exemplified just this problem. The child was young, just 8 years old in this case, but they were as sharp and eloquent as a 15 year old at least. The adults explained that sometimes the effects of gene editing centuries ago reappeared in their bloodline. Most gene editing was now heavily limited in the colony since the eugenics wars. The lingering issue from that gruesome and suffocating period of human history was finding ways to integrate and rebuild trust in what was left of the descendants from all sides of the war.

We sat in the familiar circle and were roughly five paces in when an elder cousin of the child came forward. They had got to the age of 17 without calling for their naming-ceremony and you could feel the knots in the stomachs of the elders clenching as they ambled their way up to the child.

"Here you go," they said, handing over a large clay brick studded with small pebbles from the river. "For my favourite cousin" they said with a smirk. The child grinned up at their cousin and received the gift. They stared into space as the smile slid off their face.

Helia, our host for the day, launched herself from the floor and scooped up the child who'd started to cry, whisking them out of the hall. The brick fell to the floor with a dull thud. Just as I was readying myself to march over to the teen and give them a long talking to, one of the other teens approached them.

"Dylan," he said softly, "come let's go for a chat." The other teenager, Dylan, muttered something under their breath. "I get that mate, but Amir looked pretty devastated." I would have recoiled from the look Dylan threw at the approaching teen, but he picked up their hand and held it against his face. "I know, but I am here now, I'm with you now. Can, can we just talk, please?" Dylan looked at the brick whose terracotta orange clashed with the rich red hues of the carpet. They nodded, stood up, and the two left the hall.

I looked around to see that the room had mostly emptied; a few had joined Helia to give love and support to the child. The rest had filtered outside into the field where the sun was setting, casting an orange glow to the carpet of white flowers.

I joined the outside crew and turned to Kamila, another elder. Before I had a chance to say anything she began to speak.

“I read your reports about your planets... The ones about punishment. That’s not how we do things here. Everything we do is built on our belief that life is sacred, life is interdependent, life is growth. That’s why the person Dylan is closest to approached them to start a process of healing justice. I’d hoped that Dylan had grown past this...” They shrugged and carefully removed a small beetle that had made a home in their long dark hair. “Besides,” they said with a small sad smile “there aren’t many of us left to bother with prisons.”

A MANIFESTO FOR MAYHEM
Margaret S. Malloch

Mayhem: noun: violent or extreme disorder; chaos.
:the crime of maliciously injuring or maiming someone,
originally so as to render them defenceless.

Look at us.

With our quiet demeanour and outward appearance of tightly constrained respectability.

Look carefully.

Our disguise conceals rebelling hearts. The (for now) restrained rage.

We are at a turning point, and change is necessary. Hardship, suffering, poverty, distress...pivot please...
'let's reimagine a better world,' 'build a new tomorrow,' 'be the difference.'
Slogans for a world where things are otherwise.

To get there... things will need to get better, or things will need to get worse.

Can we think ourselves into a society where everyone is valued and cared for, or will it require the micro-management and control that will ensure overwhelming and ultimate conformity? where we can pretend there is equality in sameness.

Can we wish ourselves into a fundamental, all-consuming change in consciousness, which will allow us to manage life in different ways?

dream on

'A different world is possible' ...

Maybe... when we remove the profit-prioritisation of social life; share resources and ensure there is enough to meet the needs of all.

'Dare to be different' ...

by disconnecting the state, no scarcity to ameliorate.

Remind ourselves that...

'anything is possible' as we work collectively, get rid of the bureaucracy, and remove the punishing institutions of policing, and prison.

When people are encouraged to share, care, and express themselves as they choose. When we have reformulated the nuclear family, but community creates a way of distribution and nurturing for everyone, where anyone in need of additional support will receive it from those around them, where hope is nurtured and nourished.

We can't compare the society before with its prisons and punishment - and after - with its transformative approach to ...everything?

We can't get there by being soft and gentle and smiling and ...other words that stick in the throat.

Not if we want to turn the world inside out and upside down and nothing can stay as it is.

Aspirational, hiding the reality of murderous intent under a veneer of coloured-in rainbows, smiley emoji faces and soft furnishings. Because like the reality of 'nature,' red in tooth and claw, the change that is a-coming will need to be razor-edged, knuckle-dusted and ready to fight back.

Just walk through the city, any city, doesn't the despair tear your soul apart?

The lost and the lonely, the left and the lame. It's a dirty old space.

Hope destroyed, Deliveroo box carriers risking their lives to deliver shit in a box.

The rotten routine of trying to make a living in the margins of the world. Why are the skies above the city not resounding with the howls and wailing of the dispossessed, the barely alive and all of us watching souls sinking in front of our very eyes.... so very quietly.

Can you feel it?

The rage inside?

The screams that we're stifling, the faces we carefully put on to get through it all. The distracted glances that we practice.

We kid ourselves that it could be different, keep being nice, keep smiling... and maybe a token of our guilt gets tossed in a cardboard cup as we rush on our way somewhere, anywhere, else.

But the time has come to rage against the machine. Rip it up and start again. Make the world turn upside down.

Red in tooth and claw.

Blood will flow. Too many have too much to hold onto and they won't let it go without a fight. We need to be ready for that fight.

Police are organised, the forces of law and order are firmly aligned behind the powerful - who are already well armoured for the fight.

We need to do this together.

Ragged-trousered philanthropists, long-haired lovers, anarchists, socialists, revolutionaries of every radical collective, outcasts, revellers and those who join us for the sheer hell of it... because hell it will be, until we turn the world upside down and shake off the greedy, the powerful, those who keep the systems of pain and rank injustice working.

We know the truth. The change that is required will not be gentle and soft, represented by flowers, and hearts and fluffy things. And that makes us dangerous.

We know it will be mayhem. Because it will require rendering defenceless those in power. It will require seizing their institutions of destruction and prisons of pain. And they will not let them go easily.

And we will be amazed at how many of us, with our quiet demeanour and rebelling hearts, are prepared to turn up and shake our fists at the state....

We are transformed - and you would do well to consider what combination of circumstances resulted in this fundamental and meteoric change in consciousness.

Mayhem: noun: violent or extreme disorder; chaos.

:the crime of maliciously injuring or maiming someone, originally so as to render them defenceless.

CRITICAL UTOPIAS: DISCUSSION

‘[Abolition is] always transitional in a sense, transition is a word you can only really make sense of from somewhere you’ve got to. It’s in the nature of this work that you don’t know if you’re going to get there. This was written into my first understanding of abolition via Thomas Mathiesen talking about “the unfinished,” you know what you’re trying to do and you know how you’re trying to do it, but you never know that you’re going to get there. So it’s more important to me that one knows what one is trying to do, than one operates with a sense that it’s guaranteed to get you there. I think that the ethic of nonviolence has to guide but there will be compromises all along the way, there will always be compromises. You’ll never be able to foresee all the obstacles that will arise [or] that you’re guaranteed to get there in the end; that’s the part that is truly fantasy and unreal. I never want to build up a utopia that is guaranteed to arrive if you do X, Y, and Z.’ – Mike

All of the stories in this section explore the complex relationship between harm and violence, responsibility, rage and revenge, and healing. As we’ve discussed, critical utopias ‘reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream.’¹ As such, these stories do not claim to present perfect societies, but use fiction as a space to explore the implications of different and better ways of living together. Some of these stories draw on learning from groups engaged in transformative justice processes, collectives who could be seen as enacting ‘everyday utopias... creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life.’² As Mariame Kaba explains, transformative justice is ‘a community process developed by anti-violence activists of colour, in particular, who wanted to create responses to violence that do what criminal justice punishment systems fail to do: build support and more safety for the person harmed, figure out how the broader context was set up for this harm to happen, and how that context can be changed so that this harm is less likely to happen again... It is not grounded in punitive justice, and it actually requires us to challenge our punitive impulses, while prioritising healing, repair, and accountability.’³

Addressing a commonly held misconception, Kaba writes, ‘while abolitionists hold a range of values, principles, and ideas about transformation, we’ve never known an abolitionist who thought that nothing was the preferred alternative to imprisonment. We believe in consequences for harm.’⁴ However as SCode notes, abolitionists are working against the social ‘salience of revenge. There’s a reason that it’s popular... There’s a reason we like to see the “bad guy” cop it. It made me wonder about what that restorative [and transformative] justice process can achieve in the kinds of cases that need it most? The most severe cases are probably the ones that really need the most intense healing and that seems to be the practice that people point towards, but that is also where the tensions are high...’

Many transformative justice processes have addressed sexual violence. Survivors of sexual violence have always been poorly served by the criminal justice system, with most incidents unreported, most reported cases not making it to trial, and those that do often further traumatising survivors while failing to secure convictions.⁵ Transformative justice is not a panacea and accounts of such processes show that while this work can be very rewarding it is also complex, time-consuming, and difficult.⁶ However, as Lamble emphasises,

‘to me, not giving up is what distinguishes abolitionist from non-abolitionist. Different systems give up on different people at different points, but the “no one is disposable” [ethic] says there’s a bottom line which is that we don’t give up, not in a utopian way that means everyone’s going to be nicey nicey and happy clappy but as an investment in not getting to that “people are disposable in certain conditions.” It’s the removal of that condition.’

Speaking about *Moments*, Jess reflected on the need for resources on sexual violence, abolition, and transformative justice that recognise the desire for revenge. They felt that the story was a really deep and powerful engagement with the recurring question:

“oh you’re an abolitionist, what about the rapists? and the people who have hurt you?” and it’s like, yeah! I do wish that we’d never met and maybe wish harm on them and stuff, but... being able to have your space to think about those fantasies and maybe get something out or explore different

ways of feeling a sense of re-empowerment or getting that out of your system is part of the process.'

Jess flagged Elizabeth Long's 'Vent Diagrams' in *Beyond Survival*⁸ as a useful tool for abolitionists to work through our complex and contradictory desires for justice and revenge in the aftermath of being harmed. In one circle is written 'I want the person who raped me to have the community love and support needed to heal, transform, and have the liberated relationships we all deserve', in the other 'I wish my rapist were dead' with the overlapping middle left blank. As Jess puts it, 'you can live in the middle, it's not a binary, and I think this story really encapsulates that and the difficulties we all have around that.' Chris added that 'there is something powerful about the simulation as allowing you to give space to the full expression of those feelings, rather than supposing that, because we have these contradictory feelings, we have to experience a balanced middle version of them. It pushes us to explore how we fully experience the intensity of those feelings and allow them to be expressed.'

Lizzie and Phil discussed how, for them, writing fiction was a non-futuristic version of the simulation and a strategy they used to work through their feelings about traumatic experiences. Dave added that he 'loved the use of a sci fi conceit to explore things already very much present in the world: remembering and fantasising... using sci fi as a tool to open up a conversation about something that doesn't rely on the technology in any way.' River pointed out that for them, the fact that 'VR doesn't have real world consequences so it's not enough.' Would VR trade accountability for catharsis/peace?

Fergus's story *The Resoletum* explored the power of nature, specifically its potential to aid healing, describing the process depicted in his story as an 'ecotechnology for conflict resolution'. He describes the ritual as drawing on restorative justice processes but with 'more mobile' roles and 'not trying to be purely retrospective but also community building and trying to go somewhere together.' Echoing critiques that restorative justice takes transformative justice processes originating in Indigenous communities and tries to fit them into an (inherently punitive) state-mediated justice process,⁹ Koshka questioned how mobile this process could be with the people involved in the process being assigned a role (victim, perpetrator, mediator) before the process had begun. They worried that narratively, the choice of the colours of the characters' clothes fixed these roles further through their symbolism, for example

in the use of orange for the person who has done some ‘wrong or harm [for] which they hold responsibility,’ pointing out that orange is also the colour associated with a USA prisoner’s uniform. How would the story change if the roles were not fixed in advance?

Chris commented on how powerful they found the last line of Jess’s story *Day 62 on Earth* because,

‘That account of a society that has got rid of prisons and is doing justice differently, we expect to be written about in quite affirming and extolatory ways, but in that moment, abolition is experienced as a tragedy, carcerality as a luxury that society can’t afford. It really unsettled some of the assumptions I’d made along the way.. it’s a beautiful piece.’

We talked a lot about the character of the cousin in Jess’s story, who Chris dubbed the ‘inconvenient person’ in the utopia who does things that cause others discomfort but also show the limitations of their system. Sarah raised how important it is to create characters who have flaws and make bad decisions in our utopias, just as it is important to resist the narrative of *some* prisoners being more worthy of release than others – e.g. children, women, trans and non-binary people, mothers, or political prisoners – in our abolitionist practice, because this implies that others *do* belong there.¹⁰ In Jess’s story, Koshka loved how,

‘the “inconvenient person” is sketched through complex details where they haven’t felt able to give themselves an identity that fits within that society. On one hand it’s bringing out a connection between causing harm and inner turmoil and a lack of secure identity, but on the other hand, the narrator’s voice is questioning the pressure around those norms, even those norms which sound really positive. It pulls away from pathologizing that individual and gets the reader to identify with someone finding these sort of Blair era “circle time” requirements to be maybe passive-aggressive and patronising!’

Jess elaborated that the story was partially inspired by the complexities of intentional community building. They reflected that some people thrive, while others never come to feel comfortable with the expected

level of sharing and togetherness and that this is okay! In the world Jess has built within the story, the community is a colony surviving after the annihilation of most of their planet, and they mused whether there would be enough 'other colonies that this teenager could be part of, or will the community have to change to fit in better with what the teen needs?' Adding with self-deprecating humour, 'thank you for coming to my TED talk!' (If Jess ever gives a TED talk it will be amazing).

Reflecting on the process of writing the story Jess commented that it had been hard to introduce an unintended consequence of the novum because 'I felt like to attack the utopia something bad had to happen and that's kind of sad I guess.' However, in doing so they remind us of something important: that nowhere is utopia for everybody, and that there is no system free of waste or pain, which doesn't mean we shouldn't work to lessen the amount of both in this world. As Mariame Kaba reflects on abolitionist organising, 'hope doesn't preclude feeling sadness or frustration or anger or any other emotion that makes total sense. Hope isn't an emotion, you know? Hope is not optimism... That speaks to me as a philosophy of living, that hope is a discipline and that we have to practice it every single day.'¹¹

DISCUSSION PROMPTS :

- Reflect on or imagine a time when you had caused someone harm. Design a ritual that would help you address your own harmful behaviour. How would you like to be supported and held to account? Why?
- How would you imaginatively represent a transformative justice process where the participants don't have fixed roles?
- Jess wondered about the ethical implications of simulations. To take some examples from recent news stories, a VR where a mother can spend time with a simulation of her dead child, or the use of VR for prisoners serving long sentences. Do you think there are ethical implications to consider when engaging with VR simulations as trauma therapy?

- 1 Moylan, *Demand the Impossible; Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, 10.
- 2 Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 2; Molly Ackhurst, "Everyday Moments of Disruption: Navigating Towards Utopia," *Studies in Arts and Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2019): 115–28, <https://doi.org/10.18193/sah.v5i1.169>.
- 3 Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 59.
- 4 Kaba, 137.
- 5 Lola Olufemi, "The Answer to Sexual Violence Is Not More Prisons," in *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 109–21.
- 6 Chrysalis Collective, "Beautiful, Difficult, Powerful: Ending Sexual Assault Through Transformative Justice," in *The Revolution Starts At Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*, ed. C Chen, J Dulani, and L Piepzna-Samarasinha (New York: South End Press, 2011), 188–205.
- 7 There are two helpful zines with this title: (A)legal, Chrysalis Collective, and CrimethInc, *What about the Rapists? Anarchist Approaches to Crime & Justice*, 5 (Dysophia, 2014), <https://archive.org/details/whatabouttherapists/page/n1/mode/2up>; Mariame Kaba and Eva Nagao, *What About The Rapists?*, Abolitionist FAQ Series (Interrupting Criminalization, 2021), <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee39ec764d4bd7179cf1243c/t/6109e65d5a8ce56464ff94eb/1628038750972/WATR+Zine.pdf>.
- 8 Vent Diagrams are based on a project by E.M./Elana Eisen-Markowitz and Rachel Schragis. Elizabeth Long, "Vent Diagrams as Healing Practice," in *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, ed. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020), 209–19.
- 9 For example: 'The "justice" system uses the language of healing and restorative justice but without implementing the necessary changes that will alter the system from within. The only change is in the rhetoric used, not in changing the value base of the programs and the system as a whole. For example, restitution and probation are now added on to long sentences, not as real alternatives to incarceration' Ben-Moshe, "The Tension Between Abolition and Reform," 89.
- 10 For a brilliant exploration of the 'perils of innocence defence' read: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso Books, 2017), 225–40.
- 11 Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 26–27.

Writing

In this section are some creative writing exercises you might want to try. They are organised based on the length of time they take to do. The origin of the exercise is referenced if known.

WARM UP EXERCISES
(MAX 10 MINS)

ALPHABET STORY

Write out the letters of the alphabet down the page: A, B, C, D etc. Tell a story about anything you like where each word is a letter of the alphabet (sequentially).

DICTIONARY STORY

Choose four random words from a dictionary then write something in 100 words that includes them all.

YOU DID WHAT?

Describe something that happened at the weekend using 50 words, all of only one syllable.

CONTINUE THE SENTENCE

Take the start of a sentence like 'She wished he had remembered to...' or 'The doors finally opened and she stepped out into...' and continue writing the story for five minutes.

LIPOGRAM

Write a passage on any topic without using the letter E or A. This exercise was popularised and named by the Oulipo group. After you've written your passage marvel at how Oulipo member George Perec wrote a whole novel in French without using the letter E! *La Disparition* (1969), translated into English as *A Void* by Gilbert Adair (1995).

WHAT WERE THE SKIES LIKE WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG?

Describe the colour of the sky without using the word 'blue' in your explanation.

BLACKOUT POETRY

Choose an existing text that you have in print form (not something you wrote). Work instinctively to highlight words within it to make a new poem. This works best when you stick to the original order of the words, often producing pleasingly crunchy phrases. Koshka Duff's evocative poem in the next section started out as a blackout poem.

QUICK EXERCISES (10-20 MINS)

SENSORY WRITING

Part one: write down the first clear memory that comes to mind (not your earliest memory) associated with four sounds (e.g. boots crunching in snow), four flavours (e.g. burnt toast), four smells (e.g. disinfectant), four textures (e.g. wool). Quickfire, important not to overthink your response. Part two: Now pick one of these and write a bit more about that memory for five minutes. Really try to focus on describing the sensory aspects of the memory. (15 mins to write, five to share back).

CHARACTER SKETCH

Think of somebody you know or a character in a book or film. Write a character sketch using objects, weather, landscape etc to paint a picture of what the character is like. Don't use any similes, i.e. 'she was like'. This exercise is from John Gardiner's *The Art of Fiction* (1984).

CHANGE THE POINT OF VIEW

Re-write a scene from a well-known story but from a new perspective, e.g. a punter in the café scene in *Pulp Fiction*, or the fight between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back* but from the perspective of one of their lightsabers.

I WAS THERE

Imagine your character reading a newspaper event about event that they actually witnessed. Let the reader see the difference between the event as reported and the truth they understand from being there. Tell the story entirely through two characters' dialogue. This exercise is adapted from a workshop led by Season Butler for the New Suns Festival at The Barbican (2021).

BEING GORGEOUS

Write a paragraph to a page (on any topic) that's meant to be read aloud. Use onomatopoeia, alliteration, repetition, rhythmic effects, made up words or names, dialect sound effects, but not rhyme or meter. This exercise, which might suit confident writers, is from Ursula K Le Guin's *Steering the Craft* (2015).

LONGER EXERCISES
(20+ MINS)

NOVUM

This exercise is adapted from an exercise Phil learned from Michael Deerwater - sci fi researcher and writer extraordinaire. It was the basis of many of the stories in this book e.g. *The PARC*, *The Resoletum*, and *Day 62 on Earth*. You could do it individually or as a group. It's in two parts and works well if you leave some time between attempting them.

Part one: take a bit time individually to reflect on a novum i.e. prisons no longer exist because... (something new, either negative or positive, that has happened). Describe what the world is like from the perspective of an outsider or an alien (one whose world doesn't work in the same way) who has just arrived on future Earth.

CONSIDER :

- What has changed in society as a result and what has not?
- How do people live as a result of it?
- What are the consequences for ecosystems and non-human life?
- When writing you could focus on description and involving senses or it could be in the form of a conversation, or a list or bullet points. Remember you can tell a lot about a society from a small conversation in a coffee shop, so don't feel need to go large and describe everything at level of social structure. 20 mins to do this.

PART TWO :

- Choose a specific problem that is created because of this novum.
- Create a protagonist who somehow realises this.
- Think about what they'll do about it. Are they a hero? What kind?
- Decide whether they'll succeed and why (not)?
- Write! (15 mins to write, then discuss)

GRID & SCENE

This works well as a group exercise. Get a big piece of paper and draw a 3 x 4 grid. Ask the group to come up with four suggestions for characters, e.g. an A.I (sci fi cliches are great) and fill them into the boxes on the top line. Along the second line add four suggestions for objects/things e.g. a vaccine, and on the bottom line add four scenarios e.g. cooking dinner. Either as a group or individually, choose something from each of the lines and combine them to write a scene in which your character has to make a difficult decision about something. If you don't want to write a scene you could work in pairs/continue working as a group to come up with some ideas about what starts the story off / acts as a catalyst. Where is the tension in the scene? This exercise is very fun and was the basis of several of the stories e.g. *The Seed*, *Beasite Blitz* (translated), and *A Fine Seam*. [20 mins]

COLLECTIVE MAPPING

Get a big piece of paper, pens, Post-its etc and do a collective mapping of what you hope a more just world/a world without prisons might look like, or some of the things we need to reimagine as part of that world. It's useful to reflect on current challenges but don't feel constrained by realism. Try to think utopian! Give people some quiet time to think and write, time to read other people's suggestions and get inspired to add more suggestions, then time to talk through what you added to the map.

THE TIME THIEF

Read the following quote from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, then do some free writing (just write, don't edit) about time travel:

*'We used to think that in the United States, contemporary mass un-freedom, racially organized, must be a recapitulation of slavery's money-making scheme. But if these massive carceral institutions, weighted like cities, are not factories and service centers, then where's the profit, the surplus money at the end of the day? Today's prisons are extractive. What does that mean? It means prisons enable money to move because of the enforced inactivity of people locked in them. It means people extracted from communities and people returned to communities but not entitled to be of them, enable the circulation of money on rapid cycles. What's extracted from the extracted is the resource of life-time.'*¹

KILL YOUR DARLINGS

Write a monologue presenting a philosophical/political/ethical position that you tend to favour, but present it through a character and in a context that modifies or undermines your position. Ouch! This exercise is from John Gardiner's *The Art of Fiction* (1984).

¹ Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," 227.

NOW
Koshka Duff

Now

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POSSIBLE STRUCTURE FOR A WORKSHOP

The following is a possible structure for a two-session creative writing workshop. Each session should be a maximum of two hours long. This structure is included in case you've never run a creative writing workshop before and/or if you find models helpful.

PREPARATION :

Bring pens, paper, snacks. It's useful to get people to read some sci fi with a strong justice theme in advance to help conversation flow. We read the extracts from *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy and *84k* (2018) by Claire North that are included on the project scrapbook. You could also use some of the stories in this collection. Both of these resources are free to download on the project website at <https://abolitionscifi.org/project-resources/>. More short stories to read and discuss:

The Cold Calculations (2021) Aimee Ogden

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas (1973) Ursula K. Le Guin

The Ones Who Stay and Fight (2018) N.K Jemisin (written in response to Le Guin's. Read them together!?)

Watchbird (1953) Robert Sheckley

The Girl Who Was Plugged In (1973) James Tiptree Jnr

All the above can be read online.

SESSION 1 (REMEMBER TO TAKE SOME BREAKS)

ICEBREAKER:

A good icebreaker is getting people to recommend a book they really appreciate, either sci fi- or abolition-focussed (you can get people to prepare this in advance). This avoids people feeling like they have to disclose personal information about their experience of the justice system. You can see the books we recommended to each other on the project website: <https://abolitionscifi.org/recommendedreading/>

WARM UP EXERCISE (MAX 10 MINS):

Quickly dive in, warm up your brains and hands! It can be fun to share these, if people are comfortable doing so. We did blackout poetry with people using the scrapbook and other bits of paper lying around. It's a quick and dirty exercise but can lead to really interesting and provocative work. For example, the poem featured in the previous section by Koshka started out from this exercise and 'collided' with some other ideas they had in mind. Koshka also used a 'cheeky' structuring principle: 1 line, 3 lines, 1 line, 2 lines (ACAB running though it!).¹

DISCUSSION (MAX 30 MINS):

Talk through one/some of/all the stories you read in advance. What do they have to say about justice? Get people to read out passages that interested them.

QUICK EXERCISE (10-20 MINS):

There's lots of exercises you could try here. We did some sensory writing which seemed to help people get into a more contemplative creative head space. Whatever you do make sure you keep some time to talk about how people found it/what they wrote, especially if they're new to creative writing.

QUICK EXERCISE (10-20 MINS):

You might want to try I Was There to develop dialogue writing skills.

LONGER EXERCISE (20+ MINS):

We did part one of the novum exercise here. Leaving time for people to talk about it afterwards.

¹ Koshka edited a great book on this topic: Koshka Duff, ed., *Abolishing the Police: An Illustrated Introduction* (Birmingham: Dog Section Press, 2021).

SESSION TWO (REMEMBER TO TAKE SOME BREAKS)

It's a good idea to check in with everyone to see how they're doing.

WARM UP EXERCISE (MAX 10 MINS):

Whatever you like!

LONGER EXERCISE (20+ MINS):

You could try Grid and Scene here? It worked really well and was a fun group activity.

LONGER EXERCISE (20+ MINS):

Collective mapping and discussion of what a more just future could look like can help inspire people and bring out the group's collective identity.

LONGER EXERCISE (20+ MINS):

We did part two of the novum exercise here, leaving time for people to talk about it afterwards.

THANKS

For more about the project and other resources see: abolitionscifi.org.

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Do androids dream of electronic monitoring?

What can rioting clones, irrepressible cloud entities, new rituals, prison ruins, and tiny telepathic beasties (among other things) teach us about the end of prisons? Abolition Science Fiction is a collection of short stories written by activists and scholars involved in prison abolition and transformative justice in the UK.

These stories are not all explicitly about prison abolition, but all of them explore the underlying question of how we can live well together, tackling complex topics like violence, revenge, care, and community. As such they can help us imagine a future without exclusion and punishment.

Alongside the stories are discussions from the workshops where we wrote and shared the stories, and creative writing exercises and discussion prompts, included to help readers explore ideas about abolition and transformative justice in creative ways. This book is for both those curious about abolition and seasoned activists who want to explore abolition through creative writing.

abolitionscifi.org

