

REPARATIVE JUSTICE, RACIAL RESTORATION, & EDUCATION SERIES

Love All, Trust None

By Michael Henry

His name is Marland. He grew up on the south side of Chicago and has been incarcerated on charges of armed robbery since early 2009. He was locked up at age 18. He didn't expect to receive a letter from an 18-year-old not-yet college student last April, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I didn't expect to get one back.

Our correspondence started as just a way to pass the time, but things changed as classes started. I already considered myself relatively radical before taking a "Politics and Protest" course, but week after week of assigned reading forced me to see the bond I had with my pen pal in a new light. I was a so-called "Black Radical" that had never engaged with inmates or the prison system beyond a surface level. That fact, of course, would alienate me from the very people I claim to advocate for. "Politics and Protest" forced me to reframe incarcerated people as members of political society, it recontextualized correspondence between me and my pen pal as a form of abolitionist praxis and mutual aid, and it unveiled the prison system's potential as a stage for organic organizing.

"Politics and Protest" was the first political science class that I took at Morehouse College. The course explored how political movements function in opposition to existing power structures, how political identities manifest through protest, and the effects of moral and ethical values on the efficacy of social movements. We covered everything from Huey Newton, to Francis Fox Piven, to Bayard Rustin, all of whom had different approaches to organic organizing and protest. The challenge for me, as someone who fancies himself as challenging the injustices of mass incarceration and prisons, was learning how to apply this knowledge to my advocacy. And this journey started by re-examining Marland's status as a prisoner.

Marland, and by extension, all incarcerated individuals, are walking case studies for the definition of Branch and Mampilly's idea of the political society. The term political society, as prescribed by Brandy and Mampilly, refers to the urban underclass of which members do not enjoy the same rights and protections available to members of civil society. Civil society, by contrast, enjoys formal legal protections, access to employment, state resources, and professional associations. Members of political society are instead identified by the cycles of violence and neglect they experience at the hands of the state.

[Political society] emphasizes this urban population's immediate political relations with the state, relations unmediated by the law or by the formal procedures or institutions that are available to civil society. Instead, political society deals directly with the state or with political elites without formal guarantees ([Branch & Mampilly, 2015, p. 20](#)).

One particularly dreary Sunday morning, Marland called me to talk about his experiences trying to improve the living conditions of the various jails he's lived at over the course of his sentence. One prison, he recalls, subjected its inmates to dehumanizing levels of squalor. Rats and mice, cockroaches, ants, and other undesirables permeated his vivid descriptions of the few weeks he was kept there. At each of the facilities he's been held, he has filed grievances with the administration. Brutality and maltreatment from the guards, liberal and excessive use of solitary confinement, unsanitary conditions, lack of access to learning materials like books or writing utensils (His latest project demanding access for sanitation workers to protective gear during a pandemic); the list grew with each prison he'd been transferred from.

This consistent cycle of filing a grievance, then being transferred to a new facility underscores a central

tenant of the state's behavior towards political society: neglect. Rather than addressing the dehumanizing conditions its inmate population is subject to, silencing and suppressing the activist-minded prisoners keeps the rest in line. Branch and Mampilly's work, among the other readings of our class, reframed the ways I saw the violence Marland experiences on a day-to-day basis. I came to understand corresponding with an incarcerated person as a form of mutual aid and abolitionist praxis.

Decarceration, a central tenet of prison abolition as prescribed by political theorists like Angela Davis, refers to community and government initiatives intended to reduce the number of people being incarcerated. The prison industrial complex is fueled by racist policing policies, the criminalization of poverty, and especially the reincarceration of released inmates. Empirically speaking, inmates with pen pals are less likely to reoffend, and by extension, less likely to further fuel the prison industrial complex by way of reincarceration.

Mariame Kaba, in her *New York Times* opinion piece, "[Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police](#)," outlines why abolitionists value decarceration as a primary strategy:

People like me who want to abolish prisons and police, have a vision of a different society; one that is built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation. What would the country look like if it had billions of extra dollars to spend on housing, food and education for all? (Kaba).

On October 14th, 2020, my letter of recommendation for Marland reached the parole board's table. After much deliberation, they decided to reduce his one-year remaining sentence by almost three months. As small as my contribution may seem, when those on the outside invest in, form strong relationships with, and support incarcerated people during their sentences, they are supplying mutual aid and contributing to the obsolescence of the prison industrial complex.

I attended a webinar with Angela Davis and Naomi Klein entitled, "[Movement Building During the Time of Coronavirus](#)," as well as "[Black Power Afterlives](#)." A common theme across both webinars was the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic has made already marginalized populations even more vulnerable to sickness, discrimination, and financial exploitation. This idea holds true for incarcerated populations, too. But as Naomi Klein and Angela Davis argued, the Left can act most effectively during crisis, in the name of those most marginalized.

It started when Marland expressed interest in our reading by Ondrej Cisar, "[Social Movements in Political Science](#)." I sent him a print copy in the mail, and we discussed the essay's contemporary applications the next weekend. A few days later, he wanted a copy of "[Essays from the Minister of Defense](#)." Then, a few pages from [Poor People's Movements](#). He was a voracious reader, finishing whatever I sent him before I could even prepare the next letter.

One day, he divulged the details of his little project, a (socially distanced) book club of sorts, where a handful of inmates can read and discuss the materials I send, during recreational time. In that moment, I realized that prisons in and of themselves are spaces for the marginalized to understand the abusive and dehumanizing nature of the system they live under and organize for change. The prison industrial complex is a perpetual violent crisis, a crisis through which organizing is possible. As author Jane McAlevey wrote in [No Shortcuts](#):

the organizing approach relies on mass participation that expands organically, without the help of dedicated activists... Organizing places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don't consider themselves activists at all... In the organizing approach, specific injustice and outrage are the immediate motivation... (McAlevey 10).

It was only a few days ago that Marland notified me of his growing interest for his discussion sessions. The tangible institutional changes created by these discussion sessions remains to be seen. Yet the power

structure analysis that Marland's sessions are no doubt developing which leaves injustice open for challenge and pushback. A careful, methodical analysis of the institutions that hold power, where they get their power from, and how to challenge those sources creates opportunities for positive change, even for incarcerated people.

My experience with Marland taught me how to meet people where they are. There exists a persistent idea of the ivory tower academic, one who is so consumed by theory and discourse that he is divorced from the material needs of the outside world. But through education, abolitionists should challenge this perception. The voices most needed for racial reconciliation and social justice are also the voices hidden behind iron bars, on street corners, or in solitary confinement, often without the resources or opportunity to ever reach the classroom. It is therefore incumbent upon abolitionists to extend education to those hidden places. Abolition is not something that occurs purely through institutional action or within the halls of academia; it is an intercommunal practice, it is mutual aid, it is everyday education and everyday action.

His name is Marland. He is an insatiable reader and an organizer, with a passion for law. He comes from Chicago, Illinois, and wants to reinvest in his community after serving the remainder of his sentence. "Love All, Trust None" is tattooed on his chest, but he has a big heart and an even bigger sense of justice. Writing to Marland has been a privilege, and I would be lying if I said I didn't look up to him in some respects. I am a prison abolitionist, unapologetically and unabashedly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael is a rising sophomore studying political science at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. He is passionate about social justice, focusing specifically on combating mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex.

