



## The Activist Files Episode 27: Abolition and Organizing during COVID 19 with Samah MCGona Sisay and maya finoh

maya:

Alright, thank you so much for joining me, Samah, in this conversation on abolition and organizing in this really particular moment of the coronavirus epidemic, or pandemic rather. Yeah, I just want this to be a discussion: I have a few questions already ready to be posed to you, but I want this to be fluid and just like coming from your personal experience and your own definition.

Samah:

Wonderful. Thank you for the invite. maya, I really appreciate it. And I feel really honored that you thought of me to include me in this conversation.

maya:

Of course, I'm really inspired by your work at the African Services Committee and Survived and Punished, and just want to get into that more. I think you have a very particular perspective that is really important in this moment to be heard. So I wanted to start off with sort of your personal definitions of what abolition means to you. I think that that's a very broad term that if you aren't identifying as an abolitionist, you don't necessarily know what that means or what it entails. So I'd love to know what does that mean to you?

Samah:

Yeah, I think abolition as a term has been around for a long time, but personally for me, and the way I came into abolitionist spaces, I think of abolition in its simplest form as love and the desire to create conditions where people in communities I care about can thrive and not live in fear and live with criminalization. There are definitely more formal definitions of abolition. My formal definition comes from critical resistance and from learning from people like Angela Davis, Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, you know, just radical black women organizers. But as critical resistance defines abolition or as they say PIC or prison-industrial complex abolition, it's really a vision of eliminating imprisonment, policing and surveillance, right?

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Samah:

So I think oftentimes when you talk about abolition, people think of the prison, right, as a structure. And the idea that all abolition is about is shutting down the prison and folks who do this work are very adamant and stating. No. When we talk about abolition, prison-industrial complex abolition, we're talking about an entire system and the system of course includes the prison, but it includes the prosecutors. It includes the police and includes our entire system of surveillance and white supremacy and trying to think and imagine ways that we can live outside of those systems and create our own definitions of safety.

maya:

That is such a brilliant definition of - just abolition. And you also answered my question of "what is the prison industrial complex?" That was going to be my next question. And I think that that is so helpful and so important to let people know that when somebody says they're an abolitionist, they're thinking about the entire carceral state. That includes both being in actual incarceration, but also just being surveilled and policed in our day to day lives.

Samah:

Exactly.

maya:

That's so brilliant. And I in many ways get my definition, or came to understand abolition, also from critical resistance. So that's just so helpful.

Samah:

They've been doing the work.

maya:

Absolutely. Ruth Wilson Gilmore is amazing. I'd love to know, when did you begin to identify as an abolitionist, and if there was a pivotal moment or experience that convinced you that policing, surveillance and prisons don't work and aren't necessary?

Samah:

Yeah, I think I came to abolition recently. It's definitely been a journey. I feel like I was very much radicalized during my undergraduate studies and I think that's when I became quote-unquote political, where I was able to understand that the daily struggles I experienced and people I love experience is related to politics and was able to put words to those things. So I was involved in vibrant student movements that fought for closing Guantanamo Bay and ending the militarization of ICE. You know, justice after the murders of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Gardner, et cetera. But during that period, even though I was radicalized, I was definitely a reformist. I did not consider myself an abolitionist. I believed that the system is broken and that, you know, some things just needed to be changed. People needed to be convinced of certain things.

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Samah:

You know, “we need to reform certain things and create certain laws and policies.” And then we would live in a more just world. And that thinking is what propelled me to go to law school, you know, because I was a hardcore reformist, you know, I cared a lot about these issues, but I still believed that the law, politics, you know, policy could bring about the change that I and so many other people were fighting for. But then I got into law school and I started attending courses and I wasn't able in the beginning to put words to it, but I was always angry. I was just, I was frustrated and just so angry during my courses. And I think during my first year, it was when I really began to understand that Audrey Lord quote that goes around all the time. The idea that the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house. *[maya lifts up left arm and shows Samah their tattoo of the Audre Lorde quote]*

Samah:

Yes, yes! And I just realize how entrenched everything was within the law and how the law itself was the problem, right. That, yes, we may get small wins here, small wins there, but there was never going to be large systematic change based on like changing the law and policy that you needed multiple strategies to bring about change. And that's when I was introduced to Survived and Punished. And I think the ideologies that Survived and Punished New York brought forward for me, I'd already known. I'd known these things right, but it was having a space, a political home, if you will, where I was able to really dive into political education and really learn and unlearn a lot of things that brought me to a space of saying, yes, I am a prison abolitionist. And specifically I was introduced to Survived and Punished New York because of a case in 2016. A young girl, Bresha Meadows from Ohio when she was 14 years old, she killed her father in self defense.

Samah:

And the prosecutors were trying to charge her as an adult. And a lot of people involved with Survived and Punished started a defense campaign for her and individuals at my law school became involved with that campaign, including myself and just learning about Bresha's case and just seeing how the system that, you know, claims to care about survivors to care about young people, you know, like all these words that are used, create this perception of wanting justice was being turned around to criminalize and villainize this young girl and Bresha's case is like one example. But I think it just brought to my attention like the system, right? Like these systematic issues that were not going to be solved by, for instance, putting a new prosecutor in office or something like that.

maya:

Absolutely. Thank you for sharing your experience and just your journey and process towards abolition. In many ways, I feel like mine is similar. I also think that I was relatively a reformist until I found a political home in college at Students Against the Prison Industrial Complex at Brown, where I actually got to grapple with people who already identified as abolitionists and read texts and just realize the many ways in which the university that was like over 200 years old perpetuates many of the surveillance and policing strategies that are present in all parts of the United States, specifically against Black and Brown staff and faculty and also citizens and

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community members of Providence in particular. Yeah. Thank you. So, yeah. I'd also love to talk more about your legal work now as an attorney working in an organization that centers immigrants of the African diaspora, the African Services Committee. I'm wondering if you could speak to some of the unique experiences that Black immigrants in the U.S. face. Also as a person who is a child of Black immigrants would love to talk more about that because both my parents immigrated here from Sierra Leone, and I think that in many ways I didn't really enter immigration work until I became an adult, in part because there wasn't a large African community in North Carolina where I'm from, but also in many ways, because I felt like my Blackness was more weaponized and criminalized in a much stronger and more visceral way than my immigration status or my parents' formerly undocumented immigration status.

Samah:

Yeah. I think the experience of Black immigrants within the United States, it's a very interesting one, especially for folks who either immigrate to the United States when they're very young or children of immigrants, right? Because in a lot of ways, the narrative is you're Black. And so, you know, all these discussions about immigrants doesn't really have anything to do with you, but I, I really was drawn to doing immigration work specifically for Black immigrants within the U.S. because I think Black immigrants sit at a very interesting intersection of injustice in the United States, right? So there is all the anti-Blackness that comes with existing and criminalization. And then within the immigration space, there's also a lot of erasure, this idea that, you know, there's Black issues and then there's immigrant issues. Really making it seem as if individuals who are Black and immigrant do not fit that space.

Samah:

Even though oftentimes when we're looking at, you know, how ICE operates and the rates of deportation in the United States even though Black immigrants do not make up a large percentage of immigrants within the United States, they are one of the highest recorded groups, for quote, unquote, criminal convictions and things of the sort. So I found this work to be really important because it sat at all the intersections of my identity and really exposed all of the injustice in the U.S. system as a whole. And generally I feel like, to be fully honest, within the immigration system, the injustice is just there and in your face, like there's no way I can fool myself and say that what is needed within the U.S. immigration system is like a new law or a change. The entire system is racist, right. And especially the entire system is anti-Black.

Samah:

And just working in that space where I'm constantly reminded of that, I think was really important to me because it wouldn't let me fall back on this idea of, "Oh, if I just work harder on this case", or, "Oh, if I just tweak this one thing, then the system will change" because it's glaring just like the whole system needs to be abolished, right? And so I was really interested in working in that space. For instance, my first case that I did within the immigration court was for a Black woman from Ghana who had a criminal conviction. And when we met her, she had been incarcerated for six months. She was arrested while dropping her youngest child off at kindergarten by ICE. And how could I look at that person and tell them, "Oh, your case is just, you know, a mistake, you know, like we can solve your case. There's nothing wrong with the system."

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Samah:

Like just, you know, looking at those facts, the entire system is so messed up. And regardless of the fact of whether or not we were able to get her out of detention and help her get status in the United States, those things didn't matter. That system that did that to her still exists. And so I think that's what fuels me is because I believe this intersection really exposes the collusion between the U.S. criminal and immigration systems. And it just really exposes the cruelty and pushes me to really abolish it all.

maya:

Yes, I love it. Absolutely. And I think that, that just reminds me that abolition requires an analysis that says like, "okay, no, this system isn't broken." The system was absolutely designed to warehouse us, to surveil us, to police us specifically us who are Black, who are immigrants, who are like queer trans, et cetera. Those of us who don't have a stake or can't fit into the mold of cis[gender] whiteness, specifically cis[gender] white maleness.

Samah:

And you know, the work I specifically do at African Services Committee. I work with survivors. So individuals who've gone through different forms of whether domestic, sexual, or other forms of gender-based violence. A lot of my clients are trans women. And the reason why I really wanted to focus on that intersection is I think with immigration—and this, this is where also the anti-Blackness comes in—when people are doing quote unquote victims work or work around survivors within the immigration system there's this narrative of like this perfect survivor, right? Who is the one who like assists the law enforcement and like are able to get status and sort of leaving folks who have criminal convictions because they live in highly surveilled Black communities because they are in situations where they have to either sell drugs or engage in sex work to live, like where all those people are sort of marginalized and not advocated for. So for me, another aspect of why this is really important as I think within the United States and honestly, within Black immigrant communities, there's this narrative of the perfect, you know, immigrant who comes here, who works hard, who builds their life. Who's perfect and deserves to be in the United States. I'm really trying to disrupt that narrative and say, no, you know, this person does not need to be quote unquote, perfect or meet some standard of respectability in order for them to deserve, to live a life free of surveillance, free of policing, and to be able to move around freely and have status in this country.

maya:

Absolutely. Thank you for that. And your work in *Survived and Punished* kind of leads into my next question. It's, I've been thinking about COVID and how we've been forced to, in order to protect other people who are immunocompromised, to shelter-in-place and what that means for people who are forced to shelter-in-place with their abusers. Like the fact that you're seeing so many rates of domestic violence going up and also thinking about how that intersects with like folks who are in the sex work industry and how, if your work relies on physical contact, how do you maintain a semblance of like continued financial revenue in this moment, especially when so many sex workers did not get that \$1200 stimulus check. Yeah. The industry is criminalized. Like if you're in

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a criminalized economy, how do you even get the measly support from this government? So yeah, I wanted to talk more about Survived and Punished work. Like I know Survived and Punished's work is rooted in ending the criminalization of survivors and also freeing survivors from New York prisons. Why do you think that it's important for abolitionists to center survivors of domestic and sexual and physical violence in our organizing work?

Samah:

So Survived and Punished is a national organization. And I'm lucky enough to have found space within Survived and Punished New York, which was started around 2017, late 2017, early 2018, and has done so much since then. It's, it's, it's amazing. Just what a small coalition of people who are really committed to abolition can do. And I, you know, Survived and Punished's mission is really about centering the experience of survivors and showing how, you know, oftentimes, like I stated before, there's this narrative within the criminal system, within the United States, generally that survivors are, you know, these, you know, people who need to believe that the criminal system exists to protect them. Right. That's like sort of the narrative that exists. And what we see is that actually from recent data, that 90% of incarcerated women are survivors of gender violence, right. And I think what Survived and Punished does very well is expand the idea of what it means to be a survivor.

Samah:

Because I think oftentimes we have this very heteronormative, white cis[gender] idea of what it means to have survived abuse, right. And Survived and Punished really pushes that and says that, you know, people are criminalized for surviving. So that's engaging in sex work. They're criminalized for defending themselves, right. Against individuals who are trying to physically harm them. And yes, we do have many members of Survived and Punished who are currently incarcerated, who are incarcerated for you know, killing their abusers, who have experienced, who did experience years and years of domestic violence, but people who are survivors can fall out of that narrative as well. And so I think it's really important to center the experience of survivors because we also know that prisons are an epicenter violence, right? Individuals experience high rates of sexual violence when they're incarcerated, especially trans and gender nonconforming folks.

Samah:

And we know that prisons are not doing anything to help individuals who've experienced harm, actually heal. They're recreating those harms. And the state is now the one who's inflicting the harm on people. Right. And so I think what this narrative does is it really pushes people to step back from their idea of like good versus bad person, violent versus nonviolent person and say, here's someone who's a survivor and they're incarcerated. So where do you think they fall. Are they a bad person? Or are they a good person? Is it that simple? And it's really interesting, you know, I oftentimes I visit women upstate at a maximum security prison, and most of them are up there because they're convicted of murder. And I don't think any of them should be incarcerated. I don't think that facility is doing anything for any of them in helping them heal.

Samah:

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It's keeping them away from their communities. For many of them who are immigrants, it's going to lead to their eventual deportation or contact with ICE. You know, the whole system is violent, right? It's, it's a violent system that claims to be solving issues that it's really not solving. What it's doing is punishing people, right. It's punishment, it's a punishment system. And I think people have difficulties recognizing that. But I think oftentimes when you are harmed, you want to punish people. And it's okay to recognize that, but why create the false narrative that the prison is a place of healing, when we all know that it isn't. And you had asked before sort of about COVID in this moment and, you know, the issue of rising violence, specifically domestic violence because people are sheltering in place. And I think this is where abolition as an actual strategy comes into place, because I think oftentimes people think of abolition as something in the future, right?

Samah:

It's like this goal that we have in the future, this utopia that we're working towards. And if you talk too long, people who have been abolitionists for a long time, they'll tell you, we're not saying that there will not be conflict, right? Like that's not what we're, we're promising. We're saying we want to figure out ways to solve these conflicts without involving the state, punishment, criminalization, surveillance. And I think this is where localized efforts to really create community, to check in with people really matters, right? And really think to yourself. Okay, so you're sheltering-in-place, but are you also isolated? Do you have a community of folks who are checking in on you? Do you have places where you can go, do you know your neighbors? Right. And I think that's what COVID has really brought out. I remember when shelter-in-place first started, I saw on social media people who'd lived in buildings for maybe like three to five years, finally, checking on their neighbors, like right. Introducing themselves or being like, you know, and I think those things are, what abolitionists want to happen regularly is for us to know the people we live with, not fear the people we live with and to create systems where we can rely on each other instead of the state, because we know the state is killing us.

maya:

Wow. That's so beautiful. And thank you for that of also reminding us that abolition is both the future and also now, like in these little moments where we see people choosing care and choosing to get to know somebody and choosing like, like gaining intimacy over surveillance and over policing other people. I think to me like that is a moment in time of abolition. And to just like continue that I would love to talk more about the campaigns that Survived and Punished has been working on during these last few months of COVID, these last three months. What methods have you had to modify in the time of social distancing and protecting those who are vulnerable by not congregating together and also like, like, what are some of the specifically abolitionist demands that you all have used this moment to amplify?

Samah:

Yeah. So Survived and Punished has always had the demand that everyone should be free. Right? Free Them All. That has been a campaign that has been going on since before COVID really trying to push, especially New York Governor Cuomo to use his clemency power. He has the power to release anyone who is incarcerated in a New York State prison or jail, and he's not using that power. And so that has been an ongoing campaign that we have now seen other groups using in

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the time of COVID and are very happy that other groups are using. I think more than anything digital organizing has been really important in this time.

Samah:

And thankfully we actually had a political education session about digital organizing right before everything occurred with COVID. And I think the power of digital organizing, especially when you're in a space that's multigenerational. So Survived and Punished is a group of very young people, people who are older just like really trying to understand the power of social media while also understanding that those same things can be used against you to surveil you. And so I think it's something that's really interesting for a lot of people to learn, especially during this time. And so really a lot of our work has been through having webinars to, you know, provide information to folks through, you know, doing various forms of campaigns, whether it's like letter writing or things like that, that, you know, bring people together virtually, but we're still able to get actions done.

Samah:

For instance, there was this really beautiful letter writing of that that Survived and Punished, hosted where it was just like focused on Zoom, all together, writing and then individually sending it out. But it was, there was power in that being together, even though it was virtually I think also during this time, you've really seen a rise in mutual aid and a better understanding of what mutual aid is versus, you know, charity or just giving money, which is fine, you know, like it's completely fine to just donate and give money, but I've been what I've been really happy about and I feel like I've also learned about is like really the roots of mutual aid and what it means to actually have a mutual aid campaign. And so Survived and Punished in the past would send commissary to folks on the inside who were part of our Free Them All campaign.

Samah:

And they've really expanded that right now and really tried to make it a mutual aid effort where we're doing a lot of political education, as well as providing people with the material needs that they have right now. And then of course there's Free Them All for Public Health, which is just such an amazing coalition that has been created to really call out all these politicians and power holders and say, okay, you're claiming right now in the time of COVID that this is a public health emergency and, you know, we should be doing everything we can to save lives, but you have thousands of people incarcerated in prison. And we know that the rates of COVID are very high in those spaces. So why are you not freeing people? Right. If you truly, if you're, if you're saying you care about public health, are you saying that folks who are incarcerated like their health doesn't matter, like is that, you know, and it's been such a really amazing campaign to see how it has spread and drawn in people from different spaces.

maya :

I absolutely agree. And I think what I found is most amazing about Free Them All for Public Health is that it's created a new way for me to think about abolition: the prison- industrial complex—surveillance, policing, incarceration—that is a public health crisis, that these things actually make our communities sick. Like I've always been able to, like, know that these aren't

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necessary, these are wrong. But to frame this, it's like a public health crisis to me is a very beautiful way to talk about how prisons are unhealthy. Surveillance is unhealthy. Policing is unhealthy. We cannot live proper, healthy lives with these systems and these carceral strategies and mechanisms suffocating us. So I really appreciate that. and would love to know a bit more about some of the lessons that you've learned so far organizing under these current conditions. And if you have any ideas about how we can sustain and protect our victories that we've won in this moment beyond this moment, not letting business go back to usual.

Samah:

Mm. Yeah. I think that's also been a very important message that organizers have been spreading during this moment and saying, we don't want to return to normal, like, right. Like normal was already an issue. Like we want things to change and we want folks to learn from this moment and take these demands seriously and continue to push for them, even when the state determines that we need to stop sheltering-in-place. I think in terms of lesson: so during COVID I started working on the campaign for a woman who's incarcerated in Rikers right now named Tracy McCarter. And so Tracy is a nurse here in New York who was arrested in March for defending herself against her abusive partner. And she has been denied bail, I think about four times now and is incarcerated, like I said before, on Rikers Island.

Samah (30:02):

And so when we learned about Tracy's case, we were already sheltering -in-place and trying to think about ways to amplify her story and organize around her release. And for me, it was the first time where digital organizing was like, all I could do in the moment. And I feel like I learned so much about the importance of, I mean, this is always important, but especially in this moment of like consistent communication and it was so difficult. Like we couldn't go see Tracy, right? So we were like reverting to like writing letters, staying in communication with the family as much as possible, and really pushing social media campaigns, whether it's Facebook, Twitter to spread her story. And I felt like it was difficult in a lot of ways because I - I don't know. I wanted to be out there doing something, but I also think it was powerful within the moment.

Samah:

And so I know I said this already before, because I also feel like I wasn't always the hugest believer in digital organizing, but like, I think now I truly understand that it's a real strategy. That's important for people to learn and learn how to do it safely. And so I I'm really hoping that organizations who, or groups, formations, individuals who are dedicated to this type of work can continue spreading the knowledge that they have gained during this time. Because unfortunately, because of the society that we live in, we know things like this will continue to happen because the state, unfortunately doesn't learn.

Samah:

And unfortunately, because as we know, Black folks are the ones dying more rapidly from COVID. They truly, probably don't care. Right. and so we may see things like this happen over and over again. And I feel like there's so much we've learned from this moment that can be shared out.

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maya:

Absolutely. Yeah. I think that digital organizing, I feel like in many ways, there's definitely been like in some spaces, negative connotations to it, but I think that what I've found most important and like most brilliant in this moment is the ways in which disability justice organizers, who've constantly called for accessibility in the ways to organize and mobilize and radicalized people like we're seeing, like, what they've said in practice now. Digital organizing is fundamentally necessary because the reality is like, this probably won't be the last pandemic in our lifetime, the ways in which like we've degraded the climate, environmental climate at this point, we must learn to be adaptable and flexible with our strategies.

maya:

And also, I think for me, the biggest thing that I'm hoping that will be sustained from this moment is like the normalization of mutual aid, recognizing that supporting one another and seeing one another, like our liberation is tied up with everybody else's and that none of us are free until all of us are free. And that giving what we can when we can is something that shouldn't exist in just a desperate moment of pandemic, but in our everyday lives. I also wanted to pivot more towards abolition, and becoming an abolitionist because I think for many people not knowing what to do about violence, is a major deterrent to fully committing to an abolitionist politic. So I'm wondering, how do you personally reckon with violent harm as an abolitionist. And also, what would you tell a person who asked the question, "What do we do with all the murderers and rapists?"

maya :

They always ask.

Samah:

I know. Go read. But no, I attended this training with Ruth Gilmore and now I'm completely forgetting, but Ruth was basically like, I would just turn to them and be like, well, are prisons working? Are all the people who murder and all the people who rape in prison right now? And I remember just laughing because it's so true, right. We rely so much on the system that we know is not working, yet we keep trying, we keep saying, "Well maybe, maybe if we believe in it hard enough, it's going to solve all our social problems." And we know it's not. Like, I think, especially in this moment, you know, as we're seeing the uprising that's happening in Minnesota and people really questioning, especially after the murder of George Floyd, like, "Why do we need the police? Are they actually working? Like, are they actually doing their job?"

Samah:

Because we just saw them kill someone for writing a bad check, quote-unquote, yet we know individuals who caused more harm, but who are more powerful if you will, or have more wealth are still out there. And they're not the ones that they're going after trying to incarcerate, tight? And so, I mean, abolitionists do not push for the incarceration of anyone, right? So we're not saying what we're looking for is a world where the rich and powerful are incarcerated. And individuals, you know, like Black and brown folks, aren't. That's not what we're saying. But, I think what that does is really help people understand that the system doesn't work. And so, you know, like I was saying

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before, the people that I visit upstate at Bedford Hills are quote unquote murderers, according to the state, right. They killed someone. And I don't think that they should be in prison.

Samah :

I think the way that we talk about, you know, people who murder or people who commit rape is in this way as if they are other right as if they're not part of a community as if they're not family members. Like we know that, especially with rape, it occurs, it's an interpersonal issue. And often people are assaulted by people they know, or in relationship with, family members, right? It's not some big, scary monster out there. These are people who are within your community, within your families often, who are not being held accountable as the system exists today. Because oftentimes people don't want to call the police on their family members. Or, are pressured into not taking any steps of accountability, because they're seen as, you know, going against some type of flow if they do or are not believed to be fully honest, right?

Samah:

Like most people do not report incidents of sexual violence or rape because we live in a society where they've been told over and over again that they will not be believed. And so the system is not working. It's not catching the quote-unquote, murderers and rapists that people are so worried about. I think when people ask that question, they're truly just afraid, right? They're saying I'm afraid that I live in a society where harm will continue to occur and I don't know what to do about it. And that's fine. I don't think abolitionists are telling you they have all the answers. They're saying the system that we have right now with the police, the prisons, the surveilling. It's not working. So how else do we deal with abuse? How else do we deal with conflict? And a lot of people have been pointing to, you know, TJ, transformative justice and these very localized programs that are occurring to really try and create spaces of accountability that aren't focused on punishment.

Samah:

Right? So saying, you know, the reason why more people who cause harm don't come forward and say that they cause harm or will deny it is because we live in a society that shames and punishes you, if you do anything wrong. We learn this from a young age. This is why kids deny things, right? Like if they like knock over water or something like that, right. They're going to deny and say, I didn't do it, because they're afraid of being shamed and punished. And so what does it mean to create a space where we're saying "You can be accountable for this action and we're not going to punish you. Yes. There will be consequences. Yes. You will have to take accountability for your actions and make repair, but we're not going to throw you away. We're not going to like, you know, sentence you to a cage for 25 plus years. Instead, we're going to ask you to try and figure out how you solve this."

Samah:

And there's not answers right. There's answers to everything. Like for instance, the Bay Area Transformative Justice Hub does a lot of work around childhood sexual abuse and rape. Right. And that's, you know, they're really hyper-focused, but that's a local formation, right. Of trying to figure out ways outside of the police, outside of, you know, the prison-industrial complex system

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of dealing with these issues. They're trying and I think for a lot of people it's working. And so, like I said before, I think people are just afraid because this is all they know is the system of punishment, the system prisons, policing surveillance, prosecution, and they're afraid of harm. And they don't know how to handle harm. Like Mariame Kaba always says, people don't even know how to deal with small harm between themselves and their roommates.

Samah:

Right? Like if their roommate doesn't wash the dishes. You don't like, people struggle with that. Like just dealing with that. So it's easier to just say, well, if something happens, at least I can call someone else. I can call the police to deal with it. I don't have to deal with this conflict because people, we were not taught to sit with conflict and to deal with conflict and to address conflict. And I think that's the first step. Obviously your roommate not washing the dishes is a different type of harm than, you know, what people's largest sphere is, which they claim, you know, is like murder and things of the sort. But it's just a continuum of like how we deal with harm within our communities.

maya:

Wow. Thank you for that answer. And just like really mapping out the ways in which we are a conflict-adverse country and society. And I think, especially with the recent killing of Black men, women, and trans folks by police, I think that a lot of people are so hurt and really want punishment. There is just, I think, a general like dissonance about the fact that policing is inherently rooted in anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity. How could we expect a body that was developed to literally like keep enslaved Black people, like in their place to not run away to not go anywhere, or keep Indigenous people away from white settler colonies within the United States to be anything but racist, but transphobic, but sexist, but classist?

Samah:

Yeah. And again, people put so much faith into these systems because truly it's all that's offered as like a form of justice and this system fails us over and over and over and over and over again. But it's all that's offered, right? Like if you want justice, if you want accountability, this is the system you have to go through. And, you know, I like, I completely am sympathetic to the pain, right. That people whose family members are killed by police violence, police killings, go through. Right. And, but I can also say that I know that incarcerating or putting all your hopes in the possible incarceration of these individuals, it's just, it's a, it's a terrible cycle because it just it's like this disappointing cycle. And even if that one police officer or four police officers are incarcerated, you still have this entire system that continues to be funded. Right?

maya:

Absolutely.

Samah:

I've been so moved by the cause of organizers on the ground who are saying in Minnesota, who are saying, okay, sure. Some people are saying what they want is for these folks to be arrested. We don't care about that. We want you to defund the entire police system as it exists, like defund

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them, take their money away from them, shrink them, get rid of them. And I think because people are starting to realize that, like, if we keep focusing on these individual incidents, rather than like the entire system, things like this, just continue to happen over and over and over and over again.

maya:

Absolutely. And I think for me as an abolitionist, I am, it both grounds me in my organizing and my principles and how I stay principled, but I appreciate the imaginary expansiveness that abolition allows me. And so when we talk about defunding the police, my mind automatically goes to what could we do with the billions and billions of dollars that are spent on police departments across the country? Like you can't tell me that reparations wouldn't be possible with that money. You couldn't tell me that we couldn't guarantee clean water, quality public schools, universal health care with the amount of money that is spent on incarcerating, policing, surveillance, and like military presence in the United States but also abroad in the Global South. So on that note, I would love to know, like, what is your vision of a world without prison, surveillance and police?

Samah:

I think in its most simple, in its most simple form it's localized systems of care where public safety, it's something that communities get to decide for themselves. Right. I think in a larger term it would mean an end to punishment as we see it in this country and hopefully all around the world, right? And to, this need for the state to inflict violence on people. But, I think I want to return to what you were saying maya. I think really, for me, when, when I'm thinking of a world, an abolitionists world, I'm really thinking of those networks of care you were talking about because I think so far as it's been implemented, abolitionist strategies are very localized, and I think that's important for a reason. I think because it does rely on us being able as human beings to connect with others and create systems of care outside of the state. And so I think at a, at a simplest form, that's what I always think about, right? Because what if we were able to create these networks where we actually had everything we needed, where people's materials needs, medical needs are actually met. Right?

Samah:

And all of that money, as you were saying, was taken from the state, taken from this prison-industrial complex, and given to people to do with it as they wanted to build their communities, to build up each other. And so, yeah, I think for me, it's really about defunding these institutions, giving money back to communities, and creating networks of care where people know how to deal with conflict are actually taught these skills. But yeah, it's, it's really localized and, you know, I don't have all the answers and I think that's completely fine because even people who've been doing this work for years and years, who I'm thankful to learn from will be the first to tell you that they don't have the answers, but they're trying. And I think that's the whole point is that instead of relying on a system, we know is broken, we try to build something different that is focused on people and not on the system of racism, capitalism, and you know, being attached to property.

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maya:

Absolutely. And I think what's also interesting is when people are very hesitant or adamant that there's no way that we can exist without policing, prisons, and surveillance, I always am reminded of like really affluent white neighborhoods and how there is virtually no policing. Like I never see cop cars really surveilling or patrolling in those neighborhoods. And so you're telling me that like, people can't live without police when it's like, those of us who are extremely wealthy and white are virtually able to live outside of the carceral and surveillance states.

Samah:

And the whole idea of criminalization is just especially in the United States, so tied to race, right. Race, and wealth, socioeconomic status. And you see that people see that and yet they still in their head because of how ideas of criminalization are created in this country, find ways to blame certain communities for why they're overpoliced without thinking, like maybe it's the system and how it's structured and how the laws are structured, that leads to this. So, yeah, I think that's so important to really point out that there are spaces where folks are living without surveillance without the police. And what does that mean? That means we can, we can create a world where, I mean, honestly, we don't need them now, but like where they don't have the funds and the power to continue to harm folks.

maya:

Absolutely. And it's also, I think for me, important to think about, okay, a world without policing, prisons and surveillance fundamentally has to be an anti-racist world. It has to be a world with racial justice, that all other forms and systems of oppression must also be abolished alongside because you cannot have a world without prisons and still have racism. That does not make sense. Like also like all of these things, like we're fighting for like in a parallel line towards true liberation.

Samah:

Very true. Yeah.

maya:

Thank you so much. So they're all my questions and I'm just like so grateful to have been in dialogue with you for the last hour. You are a brilliant speaker and thinker, and so I'm so grateful to have listened and learned. And also wanted to, if you have any last thoughts or anything else you'd like to mention, I want to give you space for that.

Samah:

Yeah. No, thank you. This was a great conversation. And I think you also had so much to share that I truly appreciate it. And it helped me think through some things as I was answering. Yeah, I think for me generally, I think the way I was able to fully embrace abolition as a strategy that I'm using in my everyday life, but also as a vision for the future is just—I know, without a doubt that the system we have right now is not solving the social issues that exist, right? They're not solving them in any way, shape or form, and instead they're just harming our people. And so I think if folks can at least get there to realize that like the system is not going anywhere, like it's not changing for the better,

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unfortunately, no matter how much folks have been fighting to tweak it here and there. I think we, we welcome you. Find a political home. Learn about abolition. Political education is so important. And I found that abolitionists spaces are like the best spaces where folks, oftentimes don't judge you for where you're coming from. And it's more the idea of the journey that you're taking to learn strategies that will help liberate us all.

maya:

Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much.