



The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

Announcer:

Welcome to The Activist Files, the Center for Constitutional Rights podcast, where we featured the stories of activists, lawyers, and storytellers on the frontlines fighting for justice and liberation. If you want to know more about the Center for Constitutional Rights and our work, visit our website at ccrjustice.org. You can sign up for our weekly newsletter Frontlines of Justice, and we'll keep you up-to-date on important developments and exciting events near you or online. You can also make a donation to help us keep doing the vital of supporting our partners, movements and communities as always, don't forget to subscribe to The Activist Files and rate us on iTunes, Spotify, and SoundCloud. And now here's The Activist Files podcast.

maya finoh:

Welcome to The Activist Files podcast, um, at the Center for Constitutional Rights. My name is maya finoh. I am the Advocacy Associate at CCR. This Women's History Month CCR is really interested in pushing back on traditional narratives of Women's History Month, that center white, cisgender womanhood. Instead we'd like to uplift the legacy of Black feminist organizing. We're so lucky to be here with Andrea Ritchie, an attorney, author organizer, and co-founder of the Interrupting Criminalization Project and In Our Names Network. Thank you so much for being here today. I really appreciate you.

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

Andrea Ritchie:

I appreciate you inviting me. It's really, I have to say I'm a fan of this podcast and to be able to be on it is a real honor, especially for Women's History Month. So I'm excited.

maya finoh:

Oh, that's amazing. Yeah. I just wanna start off with you telling us a bit about the work you're doing with the Interrupting Criminalization Project. What kind of work has been most important and also what can you offer to organizers?

Andrea Ritchie:

So the Interrupting Criminalization Initiative is a partnership between myself and Mariame Kaba, who many folks know is a long time Black feminist abolitionist organizer. And we, uh, our paths have crossed many times over the years in Black feminist abolitionist organizing. And we really wanted to set up a container to approach issues of policing, criminalization, violence, and safety through the lens of Black women, queer, trans folks experiences to employ a Black feminist lens - intersectional lens - in our, um, research organizing and advocacy efforts and to serve as a real resource hub and convening space and resource generator for, uh, movements that were engaged in work around policing and criminalization, particularly through the lens of the experiences of women, girls and trans folks. So that's how we started in 2018 and did a lot of research around, you know, what the top five charges of for Black women and girls were experiencing in terms of criminalization, what was driving mass incarceration or, or just incarceration and criminalization of, uh, women, girls and trans people also particularly focused on criminalization of self-defense and survival.

Andrea Ritchie:

So the ways in which Black women, girls, queer and trans folks are criminalized, when we experience violence, as we survive and resist violence, as we survive and resist economic and state violence as well. And then 2020 came along. And one of the things I often say is that when you look at issues of policing and criminalization through the lens of the experiences of Black women, queer and trans people, you get much more quickly to the need for abolition. And so it was a natural step for us to then pivot, to supporting the work of movements, to defund and abolish police in the wake of the police killing of Breonna Taylor. Uh, now two years ago almost to the day on March 13th and, uh, the killing of George Floyd and hundreds of others since then. And so tho in that moment, we stepped in to offer resources to organizers in terms of gathering together demands folks/people were making, gathering, gathering together history context and sort of insights on what the pitfalls and tensions and potential detour on the, uh, road to defunding and abolishing police might be and putting together some resources and toolkits and trainings and opportunities

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

for folks to just come together and be in conversation about what we were doing and doing that again through the lens of the fact that many of the people who were leading defund fights in 2020 and beyond are women, queer and trans people, often Black women, queer and trans people, and often Black women, queer and trans people who are survivors of multiple forms of violence.

Andrea Ritchie:

And that's, I think something we've really been able to bring to the conversation is that movements to defund and abolish police are survivor-led movements. And they're led by people who have experienced violence and have not experienced safety, protection, healing, repair, or transformation from policing or punishment and who want more and better for themselves and other survivors and members of their communities, where we might actually rate, uh, greater safety beyond as opposed to what is happening now, where the vast majority of survivors don't rely on policing or punishment because it subjects them to policing and punishment in the first place and it doesn't meet their needs. And so that, I think has been one of the major contributions to this moment that we've been able to make it Interrupting Criminalization and just bringing kind of our combined, you know, 30 years, each of experience of organizing as anti-violence organizers, as anti-policing and criminalization organizers as transformative justice and abolitionist organizers, and as folks who have been engaged in, in various movements over time that are relevant in this moment.

maya finoh:

Well, thank you for sharing your brilliance and something you said really resonated with me that like when you center Black women, queer, trans people, it's easier for you to come down the list. I know there's this really, to me, that this reminds me the work has to always get to the root of the issue. So yeah, I just am astounded by your work. And I also on that note, like, I wanna talk a bit about the fact that you've been, you have been doing this work for 30 plus years. You've been sounding the alarm on police and state violence against women, queer, and trans people, the need to defund institutions like state law enforcement that are causing so much violence against these communities also developing networks and projects that meet community needs. So how does it feel to have the world very slowly catch up to you? I think especially after 2020, we saw this moment where abolition came to the mainstream. I just wonder how does it feel? Um, what also do you believe that the world is still missing? They still haven't caught up to you yet.

Andrea Ritchie:

Wow, I so appreciate that. And when you're saying that, it just reminded me that that perspective of starting from Black women, queer and trans people's experiences is, is deeply rooted in Black feminism. And I just really wanted to name that for Women's History Month that, you know, we start from Black women, queer and trans people's stories, and that's where we theorize from and,

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

and our experiences and our, and our visions and our dreams. And that definitely for me, has been how I came to abolition

Through my own experiences, through my mother's experiences of being a survivor of violence and not experiencing any support or safety from the State. Um, and in fact, women in my family experiencing more violence from the State, for me being a survivor myself, and then not experiencing any help from the State when I sought it. And in fact, more violence from the State, um, in the form of police violence.

Andrea Ritchie:

So I think that's where, where this work comes from for me is like my own communities and families and the people, you know, when Ella Baker always ask, like, "who are your people?" Who are the people I feel accountable to? What are the communities, um, I feel accountable to, and all of those experiences point me directly to, to abolition. I do describe... For me, there was been a couple of moments. One was actually in 2015 when Say Her Name, which is both a hashtag that was created by the African American Policy Forum. And then the name of a report that I co-authored with, um, Kimberly Crenshaw, when sort of visibility or focus on Black women and to a lesser extent, queer and trans people's experiences of policing kind of became part of a national conversation. I often described it at the time as feeling like I had been talking underwater for decades.

Andrea Ritchie:

And then suddenly I felt like I, my head had popped up above water and suddenly I was being heard and also there were, are lots of other voices talking too. And it, it was amazing. And so, you know, I wrote a book called Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color. And, you know, the title is both a statement of fact, a demand and an aspiration, right? So I think that at that moment, yes, we're never going back to a time hopefully where someone won't at least drop a woman's name in a long list of litany of, of Black men who have been killed by police. And it's still gonna be one I'm finding in a lot of locations and that people will continue to understand issues of policing and criminalization through the lens of men's experiences. Then just kind of tack on a woman's name to the story.

Andrea Ritchie:

And so that's, I think where the demand is, and the aspiration is. Like, what would it actually look like if we understood issues of safety, policing, criminalization, punishment, through the lens of, of Black women, queer and trans folks experiences? It would shift a lot. It would help us understand more quickly and more clearly all the ways in which criminalization happens, all the institutions in which it happens, the ways in which it's essentially imbricated in the very fabric of how carceral

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

states operate. Even when we're looking at institutions that we tend to think of as quote-unquote alternatives to policing like healthcare or income support, or, uh, education- that criminalization happens in those spaces. And we see that particularly when it comes to Black mothers, through criminalization of Black parents and mothers through the family policing system. We see that through criminalization, through access to medical care, whether it's drug testing of pregnant people, or criminalization of people in the sex trade who seek assistance, or as we're seeing right now live in Texas as, you know, criminalization of people accessing trans healthcare and their families.

Andrea Ritchie:

And so I think that's the piece that we're missing, right? I think that we, we sometimes are like, we need to get rid of the police in this particular uniform in this particular form, but we're not willing to give up policing as a practice. And we just wanna shift it to a sort of kinder, gentler version, right? Which is, you know, treatment, not punishment. You, maybe you shouldn't be in a jail cell, but we do think you have

to, we're gonna regulate your behavior in one particular way. And as Maya Schenwar and Vicky Law point out so well in *Prison by Any Other Name*, that experience is, is violent and, uh, repressive and, uh, policing in a different form. And folks from, uh, groups in New York like JMacForFamilies or Movement for Family Power or Dorothy Roberts, who's got a new book, um, *Torn Apart*, coming out, you know, talk about, again, all of these folks operating from a Black feminist lens, the ways in which the family regulation system has always been about policing, or at least since Black women have been able to access it, has always about policing, uh, Black women, queer and trans folks.

Andrea Ritchie:

So I think that the family regulation system has always been about policing Black women, queer and trans people. And so that's then not the substitute for policing in the forms that we tend to understand it. So I think that's where the world needs to go, that we haven't gotten yet is, is understanding if we don't just use a name, you know, visibility is maybe the starting point, but not the end point. So it's not just that we know a name or we know a story of a Black woman or queer or trans person. We need to look at the issue through the lens of their experience. And then many more forms of police violence will become apparent like police sexual violence, you know, family policing and ripping family separation that happens through policing, not just at the border, but in communities, we'll see forms of policing through access to healthcare, like drug testing of pregnant people. We'll see different locations or sites that it takes place in, like policing of the sex trades or policing, you know, in the drug war that takes the form of strip searches and cavity searches.

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

Andrea Ritchie:

We'll see, you know, many other ways that policing takes place that we might not see or pay as much attention to when we look at it only through the lens of men's experiences. We also say many more places in context and institution than which it takes place, that the, and will point us away from those as solutions and help us understand them as just part of the larger web of the problem. And so all of that I think is a little bit what's missing. To the second part of your question, when the world kind of came to a different place in conversation on abolition in 2020, I tend to think of it as happening slightly before 2020. I remember when I saw Ruth Wilson Gilmore in New York Times Magazine talking about abolition. I was like, wait, what's happening right now? And great. Right? I, I do think that it has been a, a similar experience of like being a small group of people, having conversations about the world that we wanted to build, and then suddenly that conversation expanding significantly.

Andrea Ritchie:

And that, that has been enlivening, and at times, frustrating because people are, are attempting to dilute or diminish or undermine what... They're like, "yes, of course defund the police", but they don't mean defund to abolish. Like they, they just mean reduce the budget a little bit, you know? And so trying to like, sort of hold the line and be super clear and, you know, Mariame wrote a piece in the New York times being like, no we do mean, yes, we do mean abolish the police. And, you know, we, I wrote a report for Interrupting Criminalization. You know, the demand is still defund the police, you know, I think there's a lot of sort of, you know, pushing for clarity about what abolition requires in terms of political commitments. Um, no, we can't be abolitionists and capitalists. No, we can't be abolitionists and still wanna prosecute cops.

Andrea Ritchie:

No, we can't be abolitionists and also wanna have community control over police. No, we can't be abolitionists and still think that, you know, forced psychiatric confinement is okay. And, and so I think that's been a bit of a struggle, but I think the last thing I'll say is that I do feel like 2020 as someone who's been organizing for, you know, since I've been in my teens. And then now in my getting to my mid fifties, I did feel like, you know, 2020 was kind of a final exam that I didn't know, we were gonna take. It's just like fight criminalization in a global pandemic. And now for, you know, an uprising. And now for a white supremacist insurrection. And Oh PS, the world's on fire. Right? Like, and it just felt like a moment where we, we really had to step up into meeting conditions that were unprecedented. Economically, health, uh, politically, you know, and, and I think we're still there.

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

Andrea Ritchie:

And I think that feels like an important thing to remember. I think a lot of folks are feeling kind of tired or, you know, we're just deciding it's over, cuz people are tired, right? Whether it's over racial discrimination or like police violence is over, even though police violence is... There's more police violence happening now than there was in 2020, you know. The, the economic conditions are worsening, not improving, you know, climate catastrophe continues to, to worsen and, and reach more and more alarming and irreparable levels. And I think we, we need to keep organizing from that place of like, no, we are in a moment politically in history that we need to step up into. That we are shaping the future and it's gonna be shaped one way or another. And that our actions have an impact on that. Our beliefs and our visioning and our imagination of where we're trying to go have an impact on that. And that doesn't mean we don't tap out or tap in, or take a break when we need to, but we have to meet this moment in history. And that, that I think is one of the things that really feels present to me in this moment as someone who's been in the work for a while

maya finoh:

And something that like what I was thinking when you mentioned like, you know, the visibility of having one name and I think that Black trans feminists in particular have been talking about how visibility often just like increases your precarity to harassment, to death, to like all forms of violence. And it's like, how's it really helpful if your material conditions haven't changed? And I, yeah, I just, I really love that you-

Andrea Ritchie:

That is so true.

maya finoh:

I love that you just really emphasized that like it's not just about increasing the name, but like really understanding that the prison industrial complex, policing, criminalization, surveillance, incarceration are actual purveyors of patriarchy of patriarchal violence. Um, like quite literally reproduce and just like force Black, queer, trans women, all gender-oppressed folks to like really experience this consistently in so many different forms and ways. But I also wanna touch on your work as a lawyer, in addition to being an organizer. You're a lawyer who tends to stay.

Andrea Ritchie:

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

I forgot! I forgot I was a lawyer. [laughter] I've litigated a case with the Center for Constitutional Rights.

maya finoh:

Like, uh, no, that's incredible to me. I love that. So you, you tend to stay far away from courts legal spaces. Um, but I would love to know, like how do you find yourself interacting with the law? How has it been challenging to come to this work as a lawyer?

Andrea Ritchie:

I mean, it's interesting because, you know, I went to law school later in life. For a long part of my life, I was, I had been an organizer much longer than I've been a lawyer. I think I'm now getting old enough that it might be equal, but I went to law school with, for a very specific purpose. I, I had been organizing for a couple decades at that point and realized, you know, I had studied history and politics and had come up through, you know, various political formations. And it was just really clear and also through Black feminist study and, and organizing. And it just became clear to me that I need to understand more about the structural forms that oppression takes, and those are economic and legal, right? That the, those are kind of the two apparatus, broadly speaking, that are structuring our lives.

Andrea Ritchie:

And so I'm really bad at that. So let's go to law school. So that's how I became a lawyer, but I never had in my heart, the idea that I was gonna stand up in a courtroom and argue and get justice, ever. I knew what it was. And in fact, I chose the law school I went to, um, which was, I'm proud to say Howard University School of Law, because I couldn't bear to go to a school where someone was gonna try and tell me that the law was the savior. And I couldn't bear to go to a school where people would talk about, you know, the US Constitution as, anything, but a document written by white slaveholders to uphold racial capitalism. And I'm not saying that's maybe I had higher hopes for Howard than Howard necessarily has for itself. But I did was able to, to find spaces there, uh, where that those conversations were that, and I wouldn't, I would make the same choice over again because I do believe it was a place where we understood the law in context.

Andrea Ritchie:

And so, and then I approached my legal practice as harm reduction and reparations, right? So I was never a full-time lawyer, but I was trying to figure out how I could use my now greater knowledge of how structural oppression takes place and manifests and is enforced by the law and try and take some tools away from, you know, the machine or, try and, you know, grab some repair from the

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

machine for people who are harmed by it. Or snatch people from the machine before it ate them up, you know, or, or snatched them in. And, and so I did practice law for 15 years, primarily on police misconduct against, uh, Black women, queer and trans folks, and also protest defense and legal observing, and also cop watch legal support. And so that felt to me like, how can I use these skills to kind of chip away and also doing lots of know your rights and kind of demystification of legal stuff and demystification of law and policy stuff for organizers, right?

Andrea Ritchie:

And so to use my knowledge to break down and disseminate that knowledge far and wide. So I think that's how I approached it. And then I just got to a point after 15 years of practice where I was like, I just can't spend my days trading 15 page briefs back and forth, fighting over whether I'm ever gonna get a piece of paper and, or, you know, litigating every little thing that the system does to wear you down and wear your people down. So on the one hand, I feel great that I did profoundly change the lives of some of my clients. I also was able to bring some impact litigation that made some profound changes in policy. The case with the Center for Constitutional Rights, you know, we struck down a requirement that people who offer or agree to trade oral or anal sex for something of value were being required to register as sex offenders for 15 years to life in the state of Louisiana.

Andrea Ritchie:

And we managed to strike that requirement down and get 800 people off a sex offender registry. And that made, I did feel like that was a material change, right? That went beyond the visibility piece to material change. And I feel like that was part of the, the transition, right? As I was going to law school, I was documenting people's experiences of police violence. And now I was able to try and take away some tools of it and make material changes in people's lives. And I think that something I learned over that time is like the, the pitfalls of a harm reduction approach. Like I, I do think we can't get to abolition overnight. I do think it's a process that requires steps along the way, but there are so many traps. There are so many pitfalls. There are so many ways you can get caught up in thinking you're reducing harm. When in fact you're feeding the system, you're fueling the system, you're legitimizing, the system you're making, you know, some material changes, but not preventing the next form of harm.

Andrea Ritchie:

You know, I don't wanna spend anymore time fighting to get someone compensation for when a cop did them harm. I wanna stop the harm from happening in the first place, you know? And so I, I feel like that's kind of where I got to with my litigation practice that I saw that I could make material change and I wanted to stop the things from happening in the first place and put all of my energy to that. I had to always put my energy to that, but to really devote all of it, to that, as

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

opposed to fighting with lawyers about whether something was discoverable or not. Cause I gotta tell you that's like the most soul-destroying activity you can engage in.

maya finoh:

But on that note, of the pitfalls of harm reduction, I want to talk a bit about how do you deal with the tensions of people who, who say that they speak for survivors, but from a carceral perspective. I'd love to know, like, how do you deal with those tensions with folks who are explicitly saying that, like "what survivors need are carceral interventions"?

Andrea Ritchie:

I mean, I think, and I've learned a lot from Mariame in terms of strategically about this. But I think my first response, you know, even before we were working together in this way was always like, but what actually do you, that that's gonna do for someone? And even when people come to me as clients, they would say, you know, I, I remember once I had a client in the sex trade who had experienced tremendous harm at the hands of someone that she had traded sex with and she wanted to go to the DA and I was like, okay, here's, what's gonna happen when you go to the DA. What do you actually want? And it was clear that those two things did not line up. What she wanted was the violence to stop and no one else to be hurt and this person to be accountable.

Andrea Ritchie:

And then we brainstormed other ways that that could happen that didn't involve the police, that were actually more successful. Right? And so I think even people who are directly hurt themselves, who, who want carceral responses, it's because there's no other option being offered to them. So they want something to happen. Everybody wants something to happen when, when they're hurt. And if there's only one option, then there are some people who will say, well, then give me that. But as soon as you say, here's 10 other options that might actually get you closer to your goal, people choose that. And even, you know, Danielle Sereed, who works at Common Justice, talks about the fact that most survivors, when they're presented with an option that is not more policing and punishment, incarceration, but is actually an opportunity for healing, accountability, and repair choose that. And the fact also is that

almost half of DV survivors and two-thirds of sexual assault survivors currently do not use the policing and punishment system we have for lots of reasons.

Andrea Ritchie:

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

They know they will be policed and punished themselves. Much of the police violence I've documented, involves police responses to calls for help where Black women, queer and trans people were killed, hurt maimed, sexually assaulted, harassed, criminalized, separated from their children, deported, detained- And people know that's a possibility, so they don't call or it's happened to them. So they don't call. And also because the system only offers kind of one response, right. Which is to take the person away and lock them in a cage. And people are like, I don't want that. I wanna keep getting their paycheck to support the kid. I want us to stay in the country together. I actually just want them to stop behaving in this way. And if they can't stop behaving in this way, then I need them to stay away from me. But I don't- putting them in a cage and just is not gonna transform the conditions that made this possible.

Andrea Ritchie:

So that's the first thing I say to survivors is like, or people. To survivors, what do you wanna accomplish? And, and how can we do that effectively? And then the people who say, well, you know, what about the rapist? What about the, you know, batterers is like, well, what about them? Because right now the system is not addressing them. And right now, PS, the cops are the rapists and the cops are batterers. Because, you know, police engage in sexual violence at higher rates and engage in domestic violence at higher rates than the rest of the population. And also engage in sexual violence, also in the context of responding to domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as in the context of every other policing activity they engage in. So yeah. What about them indeed? There, there are people who have engaged in sexual assault and, and domestic violence everywhere.

Andrea Ritchie:

They're not all in cages. And if we tried to put them all in cages, the cages could not contain them because there are so many people who are engaged in this behavior and nor would we want to, because also I think to the point that you made earlier, prisons are sexual violence. Police are sexual violence. If you're against sexual violence, you don't believe putting someone in a cage where they are going to be sexually violated. We know that people who are in prison, um, experience sexual violation in many forms from strip searches, cavity searches, extortion, assault by staff, by people they're incarcerated with, by any number of people. So we're not gonna stop sexual violence by it, through the current system, we're just perpetuating it and perpetrating it. We're not preventing it and we're not changing the conditions that produce it. So what are we doing? That tends to be my answer.

Andrea Ritchie:

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

There's a much more succinct version at a website called "What About the Rapists?" that you can go to that's a zine. And then there's also, um, at the Interrupting Criminalization website, a report called Shattered in Silence that I wrote about pulling together the information we have about sexual violence by law enforcement agents, as well as a fact sheet that talks about why defunding police is a survivor-led movement, because we actually want more safety. This is not doing it. This is producing more violence for us. It's creating more conditions of unsafety for us. And so what we're fighting for when we're fighting for abolitions, we're fighting for safety, actually.

maya finoh:

Thank you so much for sharing those resources as well. I think that there's so much misinformation that this is not a survivor-led movement. So yeah, I, I really appreciate that. Very briefly I really wanna talk about just your approach to the work by focusing on strengthening communities. So like community responses to violence and to imagining safety without policing. So I'd just love to know what affirms your belief in people's capacity to do this work, to do this difficult, messy work of imagining safety without policing.

Andrea Ritchie:

One, I think that people do it all the time, right? I mean, so many of us have resolved problems without the police. Like, you know, I've had massive fights with people without calling the police. Like I have deescalated fights with, between other people in front of my building without police. I have, you know, addressed someone who took something from an organization I worked for without police. Like there's, there's so much that we already do. I know we have the capacity to do it. And you know, you see it in moments of crisis and disaster. We saw last summer, you know, people helping each other, um, caring for each other, uh, checking in on each other, meeting each other's needs. We, we can do it. We practiced doing it. And that so much of safety is about or safer communities is about resource, right? Ultimately, if you have a place to call your own that you control over kind of boundaries and accountability. I'm not saying you have to have- everyone has to live in their own place.

Andrea Ritchie:

But if you have a place that is safe, that you can negotiate and navigate boundaries in safety in with relative ease, that is already a huge step towards creating safer community. If you have access to the care that you need, whether it's mental meeting your mental needs, meeting your emotional needs, meeting your spiritual needs, meeting your physical needs, meeting your needs for support people in your life like childcare and elder care. And, and um, if disabled people have access to all the things that they need, then we're in a better place. Then there's less opportunity for violence. Violence comes in scarcity. Violence comes in conditions where people have been taught and

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

learned that we have to compete and that, you know, policing and punishment is the only way to respond to harm or conflict or need. That's where, you know, so I think that there's capacity to create conditions where violence occurs less frequently with relatively easy, easily, by simply redistributing resources.

Andrea Ritchie:

Instead of having a police homeless quote-unquote Outreach Unit, you build people housing. Instead of having, you know, a co-response crisis unit where cops go out to respond to mental health crises. You make sure people have access to everything they need to be themselves. And you stop policing people about how they need to be. Right? You decriminalize drugs and there won't be violence around accessing them. And people will also then be more likely to access help when they need it. So I feel like in some ways, it's, I have faith in the possibility because it's, it's the solutions in many cases are so simple. And then in many cases they're not, you know, there are questions I don't wanna oversimplify people are gonna harm each other, even if we have full abundance and full legal and social and political conditions that drastically reduce the amount of violence.

Andrea Ritchie:

But I think in that case, I have to believe that there is another way to address the conditions that produce violence and the things that lead people to engage in violence. And I don't think we're gonna find those solutions overnight. And I think it's gonna be messy and hard, and there will be lots of

moments of despair and failure. But I, but there will also be many moments of success and lives transformed and changed. I mean, you know, one arrest or police encounter can entirely change the course of someone's life. Similarly, taking that out of the equation can entirely change the course of people's lives. Such that, you know, things evolve in a very different way. And I, I believe that we will find a way there and that we have to, because I cannot tolerate a world where police kill three people a day, at a minimum, on average.

Andrea Ritchie:

I can't tolerate a world where every five days a cop is caught in an act of sexual violence. And that's just the ones who are caught. I can't tolerate a world where people go without food or housing or clothing and New York City spends 6 billion policing them for trying to access those things and take diapers when they can't get them any other way. I, I can't tolerate that world. And so that for me is, you know, the world that we can imagine and dream of, and even those that we can't. But

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

maybe some folks, you know, through Black, feminist visionary fiction offer us a glimpse into gives me hope that we can fight towards them. So that's what gets me up.

maya finoh:

Yeah. And I just feel there's so much documentation of why our current world, the way it's configured doesn't work. So it's just like, why are we spending more money, billions of dollars into helping things that don't work.

Andrea Ritchie:

Yeah, absolutely.

maya finoh:

I think I have one more question. I wanna sort of end at the note of just thinking about the future and the possibilities of Black feminist organizing. I would say that I'm pretty new to abolitionist Black, queer trans organizing. I got involved in like 2014, 2015 with organizing collectives. And I think to me, it's fundamentally necessary for me to say that like, INCITE!, like your work has really been critical into our campaign work to address, um, patriarchal violence, for example, BYP 100, the She Safe, We Safe campaign, like that's inherently to me in the legacy of INCITE!'s work. So I would love to know what possibilities do you see in this moment for Black feminist organizers and where do we need to be going.

Andrea Ritchie:

I mean, I think you're seeing the possibilities of Black feminist organizing right now. And I think that, you know, the authors of abolition feminism now are pointing out, you know, that Angela Davis and Beth Ritchie, who are people I learned from who brought me into this work in so many ways are tracing that legacy from where they started to what's happening now and, and where they see that work going. So I think, I, I think we're seeing Black feminist organizing now in the work of BYP100, in the work of Black Visions in Minneapolis, in the work of Black Nashville Assembly, in the work of Decrim Seattle, in the work of Dream Defenders in the, in the work of so many groups, Durham Beyond Policing. I, I could just keep naming them for another hour of this podcast, but there are so many groups who are putting Black feminist organizing in practice.

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

Andrea Ritchie:

So I think we're seeing it now and I, and we're continuing to deepen and grow it. And the possibilities I see for the few are a world where, you know, I'm wearing my Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity, uh, 10 year anniversary sweatshirt here, and, you know, BOLD invites, uh, Black leaders who go through the program to make commitments and teaches us to make commitments. And I'm a commitment to a world where Black women and girls can freely love and be fully loved, and in all the ways that we can imagine. And so that's where, what I use to judge what I'm doing, is it bringing us closer to that goal? Am I standing in that commitment and doing that work? And I do see that possibility. I do see a possibility that people can have access to everything they need, that education can be liberating, that we can be making contributions to the collective in ways that aren't ruled by capitalism, that aren't fueled by profit and exploitation, extraction.

Andrea Ritchie:

I'm having a harder time these days, seeing a world where we somehow pull back from a climate catastrophe that we're in. But I believe that if we really think about what a just transition looks like, what building back better actually would look like, what does our recovery and making sure as many of us survive this moment and the things that are coming with as much joy and abundance and collaboration and collectivity as we can, um, make happen. That's then I, then I see a future where, where we can be much freer from violence than we are now. And certainly one where we can be free of violence, of policing, punishment, you know, borders and, and the violences of racial capitalism. So definitely not gonna happen in my lifetime, but it definitely feels like 2020 and the work that's come out of it has leapfrogged us into a new era.

Andrea Ritchie:

And I just wanna say to folks who are feeling demoralized by the backlash and by the public discourse and punditry, and the relentless kind of media and politician bashing of the work and that we've been doing over the past two years to invite them into the long arc, you know, of this organizing. That I was there in, in 2001, when you know, between Rodney King and Amadou Diallo, we had pushed the legitimacy of policing, you know, to the brink. We had really created a con and then overnight 9/11 happened. And we couldn't talk about police violence for a decade. And then we were able to, I mean, obviously we did and we fought it and we organized, and we continued the work and we built it to the point where yes, when 2014 happened when 2010 happened, we were able to, you know, have the air breathe, you know, the oxygen, go into the fire and move forward. And that's where we are. We're now at the, a place where we're like building, building, building, building, and there'll be oxygen in the fire and we'll move forward again. So I just want folks to really know that this is the work. This is the pattern. This is the arc, and people are doing the work and people aren't gonna stop fighting for safer communities and that's our commitment. That's where we're going.

The Activist Files Episode 48: We've Always Been Here - The Radical Spirit of Black Feminisms and Abolitionist Organizing

maya finoh:

That's left me feeling optimistic, at the very least critically hopeful.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoy this episode of The Activist Files, the Center for Constitutional Rights podcast. Just a reminder to subscribe and rate us on iTunes, Spotify, and SoundCloud. And if you wanna find out more about our work, visit our website@ccrjustice.org, that's all until next time on The Activist Files.