



No One Left Behind: Black Feminist
Abolition as The Heart of Penal Abolition
and Critical Criminology

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Introduction

In March of 2012, Marissa Alexander—a 29-year-old African American mother of three—was convicted of three counts of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, for firing a warning shot in a confrontation with her estranged abusive husband, Rico Gray. The incident happened on June 31, 2010, when she returned to the home she shared with Gray, to collect some of her belongings. Marissa was finally leaving Gray and was gradually moving out of the house, but like most domestic violence victims, she could not tell him that she was leaving him. However, Gray unexpectedly shows up at the house and gets jealous after looking at text messages on Marissa’s phone and starts to threaten to kill her. Scared for her life, Marissa ran to her car to leave, but the garage door was broken. She then grabs her gun from her glove compartment and shoots a warning shot to scare her abusive husband away. Marissa explained to the police and the court that she fired the warning shot in an act of self-defense, which under Florida’s stand-your-ground law she has the right to do. Florida’s stand-your-ground law indicates that people can use deadly force if they are in danger. Since her husband had past arrests for domestic violence and in 2009 he beat up Marissa so badly that she had to get a restraining order against them, Marissa had no reason to doubt him when he was threatening her life. However, even though this clearly was an act of self-defense, the judge rejected her effort to invoke this law (Jeltsen, 2017). Despite the fact that she had no criminal history and no one was harmed or injured, she was sentenced to a mandatory minimum prison sentence of 20-years.

Her sentence came from the *10-20-Life Statute*, which states that regardless of mitigating circumstances, if someone is convicted of an aggravated assault in which they discharge a firearm, they must be sentenced to 20 years in prison (Cohen, 2024; *FLORIDA’S “10-20-LIFE” LAW*, 2024). In Marissa’s own words, “You’d think that kind of sentencing is intended for violent offenders who use guns while committing crimes, not somebody who is protecting herself” (Amber, 2015, p.3). Being a Black woman in this country does not mean we have the right to defend ourselves. If we did, Marissa Alexander would have been protected instead of criminalized.

At the same time, on February 26, 2012,—which is a month before Alexander’s conviction—George Zimmerman shot and killed unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Trayvon Martin was an African American teenager who went to a store near his father’s home simply to get Skittles and iced tea. It

was on Martin's way back to his father's house when George Zimmerman murdered him and claimed it was self-defense. Zimmerman called the police before he shot Trayvon. He explained to them that the neighborhood had some break-ins recently and he saw a suspicious guy who "looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something" (Listing, 2017). He tells them that "this guy looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something" (Listing, 2017). He further explains that the guy is black with dark clothes and has something in his hands. The operator then tells him that they have police officers on the way and instructs

Zimmerman not to follow Trayvon. They specifically told him "We don't need you to do that" (Listing, 2017). Despite the operator's instructions and despite the fact that police were on the way, Zimmerman says under his breath "These assholes they always get away" (Listing, 2017) and then he shoots Trayvon. Zimmerman was fully acquitted of all charges under Florida's "stand-your-ground" law on July 13, 2013.

Both Marissa Alexander and George Zimmerman claimed self-defense. Alexander claimed self-defense for firing a warning shot that did not hit anyone at the ceiling. She fired the warning shot because her abusive husband was threatening to kill her. Zimmerman was claiming self-defense for shooting and killing a 17-year-old black boy named Trayvon Martin. To our criminal legal system, Marissa Alexander and Trayvon Martin are threats to society. Therefore, Marissa had no right to defend herself, and Trayvon was only entitled to live the first 17 years of his life. In an interview with ESSENCE, Marissa Alexander explains her story and says, "All I wanted to do was gather my things and get out of the house" (Amber, 2015, p.3). How can our system look Marissa Alexander in the eye and tell her that she has no right to defend herself against her abusive husband and lock her up for two decades? How can Zimmerman and Marissa have different outcomes under the same law in the same exact state? How can the court agree with Zimmerman that he had every right to use deadly force against an unarmed 17-year-old Black boy? How can our system see Zimmerman's actions on February 26, 2012, as an act of justice? We are led to believe that our criminal legal system is here to protect its citizens, but these cases show the complete opposite. This system criminalized a victim of domestic violence defending herself. This system also completely justified a 17-year-old being murdered. Therefore, these cases explicitly show that our criminal legal system believes that black lives do not matter.

Unfortunately, Marissa Alexander's case is not unique and neither is Trayvon Martin's death. Our criminal legal system has always perceived black bodies as disposable. As a Black woman myself, Marissa Alexander's case shows me that I cannot expect our criminal legal system to protect me when I have to be protected. I should expect to be ignored and criminalized by our criminal legal system, just like Marissa Alexander and millions of other Black women in this country. This is the motivation and reality that Black feminist abolitionists have. It scares us that we live in a country that picks and chooses if we should be protected. Therefore, this system can not be trusted and can not be reformed, it must be abolished.

Reform and abolition are not interchangeable terms. The point of prison and police reform is to make prison and police tactics more humane. Reformers accept the criminal legal system as a legitimate and necessary institution for reducing harm and keeping people safe. They ignore the fact that after slavery was abolished the criminal justice system was used to control Black people. At the time, Black males were imprisoned for things like not signing slave-like labor contracts with plantation owners and looking the wrong way at a White person (Saleh-Hanna, 2008). Our criminal legal system was built to target Black people, women of color, and poor people. Therefore, prison and police abolition completely rejects the criminal legal system altogether because police and prisons are oppressive systems. Abolitionists do not trust any oppressive system because oppression requires inequality, control, and domination to maintain control. All prison reform and police reform does is reform oppression, it does not abolish oppression. Therefore, reform actually creates more harm, instead of reducing harm, because reform actually makes the criminal legal system stronger and more oppressive. By putting police more in marginalized communities than they already are, continuing to make long and harsh prison sentences, and 'getting hard on crime,' we are just making the oppressive system more oppressive. Since abolition completely rejects the criminal legal system—which includes police and prisons—it demands we have complete alternatives. In other words, abolition demands oppression to be completely abolished from society. Furthermore, abolition demands that we create a society where oppression is not even possible. Therefore, abolition is the only solution.

Abolition is far impossible because dismantling oppression is possible, we just all have to be committed to it. A society that uses oppression is a society that believes in inequality.

Abolition is always on the side of freedom. Black feminists have spoken about how the criminal legal system must be abolished for decades. We have always shared the experiences that we have with the criminal legal system. We have also, always had an extensive amount of evidence that the general public and fields like mainstream feminism, critical criminology, critical psychology, and others just have not been listening. Therefore, in this essay, I review Black feminist literature, the voices of the forgotten, to explain why the criminal justice system must be abolished, to explain what abolition looks like, and to show that Black women have been doing abolition work for decades.

Post-Slavery Institutions

When you look at the criminal legal system from a historical anti-black racism lens, it is clear that the oppressive system of white supremacy is built into the U.S. punishment system. Black feminist abolitionists argue that the United States has never had a justice system because our criminal legal system is inherently an oppressive system. When the United States was being created, slavery was the dominant way Americans made the most money while doing little to no labor. Since Black people were enslaved, they were only a part of physically building this country, while white people ideologically and structurally created it. White people created the laws, and the social norms, and Black people were completely excluded from the conversation. Furthermore, even though the 13th Amendment prohibits forced labor it does not prohibit white supremacy, and white supremacy continued to be the social norm after slavery was abolished. In other words, the 13th Amendment abolished slavery but did not abolish white supremacy. This allowed post-slavery institutions to be created, which are institutions that rely on controlling black people and use racist practices and ideologies to justify controlling Black people. Examples would be lynching and segregation because both came about after slavery and both are racist institutions.

To clearly illustrate how prisons and police are inherently racist institutions we must look at the history of the U.S. punishment system. According to Davis (2003), the post-Civil War evolution of the U.S. punishment system was a literal continuation of a slave system, which was longer legal in the 'free' world. Before slavery was abolished, the prison populations were mainly white because black people were being controlled by slavery. After all, only people who had rights go to prison and slaves had no rights to anything.

Slave codes controlled every aspect of slaves' lives. According to Slave Codes, slaves had to do whatever their masters told them to.

They made it illegal for slaves to learn how to read and illegal to get any kind of education. What, when, and how enslaved people ate, wore, worked on, spoke to, etc. was controlled. If slaves broke Slave codes, since they had no rights and were not even considered humans, they would be punished, by physical abuse or withholding things from them like food, sleep, etc. Immediately after slavery was abolished, instead of making a plan to uplift freed slaves as American citizens, the southern states were determined to develop a criminal legal system that could legally restrict and control freedom for newly released slaves.

Now that the institution of slavery was illegal black people were a part of the “free” world. Slave Codes became Black Codes. Black Codes were crimes that only applied to Black people. Therefore, the true crime was being black. Since the laws under Black Codes were re-articulations of Slave Codes and were used to imprison black people, criminal legal penalties became inherently racialized. For example, vagrancy was illegal under The Mississippi Black Code, but only for black people. This was due to the fact that newly freed slaves usually were unable to secure jobs, and the fact that, at the time, black people were not able to afford secure shelter and resources. Furthermore, black people were constantly in social situations where they had to steal because even though they were free they lacked access to everyday resources. Davis states that this “was the transformation of petty thievery into a felony” (p.33). After all, white supremacy was still at its prime long after slavery was abolished, so freed slaves could not just walk into a store to buy something even if they had money. They had to be very careful, not because they were criminals, but because society perceived them as criminals. Black people were criminalized for literally living and for surviving. Therefore, Davis argues that whiteness operates as property because “rights, liberties, and self-identity were affirmed for white people, while denied to black people” (p.30). This explains our system’s long and continued use of racial profiling which we still see to this day.

Also, as black people were being integrated into southern penal systems, during the post-slavery era, “the penal system became a system of penal servitude” (p.31) because the punishments that were used with slavery were being deeply incorporated into the penal system. This led to Black people being the prime targets of the developing convict lease system and chain-gangs

as a reincarceration of slavery, due to slave punishment and work being the norm in the prison system and attributed to black people specifically. Many scholars actually argue that the convict lease system was worse than slavery. Since, slaves were their slave owners property the survival of each of their individual slaves was valuable. Their slaves were represented as significant investments. However, convicts were leased out as groups instead of as individuals, “and they would literally be worked to death without affecting the profitability of a convict crew” (p.32). Although the convict lease system was formally abolished, its exploitative structures have resurfaced through privatization and, more broadly, in the widespread corporatization of punishment that has fueled the growth of the prison-industrial complex. This matters because the same systems that once profited from Black suffering and forced labor have simply evolved rather than disappeared. Today, corporations profit from mass incarceration, and Black people — especially Black women — continue to be exploited and criminalized within a system designed to control rather than support them.

Ruth Wilson (2007) builds on this argument by providing a detailed economic and political analysis of prison expansion in California. Gilmore doesn't just describe prisons as racist structures; she explains exactly how economic conditions produced their growth. She identifies four surpluses — land, labor, capital, and state capacity — that converged to create a boom in prison construction in California. As rural economies collapsed and military bases shut down, the state used prison building to absorb this surplus, turning incarcerated people into commodities. Gilmore introduces the concept of “organized abandonment,” where communities, particularly poor Black and Brown communities, are systematically stripped of resources like jobs, healthcare, and education. Once abandoned, these communities are policed and incarcerated under the guise of managing social problems the state created. For Black women, this abandonment is compounded by both race and gender. They are seen as undeserving of care and protection, and when they resist or survive violence, they are criminalized rather than supported. Gilmore's work makes it impossible to see prisons as anything other than mechanisms for managing the crises of capitalism by caging the most vulnerable. Reform efforts, she warns, only create new ways to repackage these surpluses, often building more “humane” cages instead of addressing why cages exist at all. Gilmore's analysis demands that we connect abolition to a broader economic vision: one that

dismantles the systems of abandonment and exploitation that make prisons profitable.

Davis (2016) pushes these arguments onto a global stage. In this collection of speeches and essays, Davis draws connections between state violence in the United States and settler colonial violence in Palestine. She argues that the militarization of police forces in Black communities mirrors military occupations abroad, and that abolitionist movements must be internationalist in their vision. Davis discusses how the Ferguson uprising and global solidarity movements reveal that carceral systems are not isolated; they are part of a global network of policing, surveillance, and punishment. For Black women, the intersections of racism, sexism, and imperialism mean that their struggles are often rendered invisible. Davis emphasizes that abolition is not only about ending prisons and policing in the U.S., but also about dismantling militarism and colonial control globally. She challenges us to think about abolition as an ongoing practice of solidarity and resistance against systems that profit from oppression and death. For Black women, this global perspective matters deeply. The erasure of Black women's experiences within carceral systems is part of a larger pattern of disposability that spans borders. Abolition, Davis insists, is about creating a world where no one is expendable.

Crenshaw's essay *We Must Center Black Women* (2021), in *Abolition for the People*, focuses specifically on how the carceral state devalues Black women's lives. Crenshaw highlights the case of Breonna Taylor as a painful example of how Black women are both targeted by state violence and erased from public conversation about that violence. The #SayHerName campaign emerged because Black women are often forgotten in narratives about police brutality, and Crenshaw insists that this is not accidental — it is systemic. She also points to the case of Marissa Alexander, a Black woman who was criminalized and imprisoned for defending herself against an abusive husband. These cases show that Black women are seen not as victims but as perpetrators, even when they are fighting for their own survival. Crenshaw argues that this erasure and criminalization are the direct result of the “perfect victim” narrative — a narrative that Black women can never fit. The carceral system depends on this failure to see

Black women are worthy of protection. Crenshaw's work challenges any reformist agenda that fails to center Black women's experiences. Abolition,

for Crenshaw, is not abstract; it requires intentional work to make Black women's lives visible, valued, and protected outside the reach of carceral logic.

Together, these works show that prisons and policing are not broken institutions that need fixing — they are functioning exactly as designed. They are the afterlives of slavery, tools of racial capitalism, and mechanisms of organized abandonment. For Black women, these systems mean living in a world where survival itself can be criminalized. Reform cannot address the root problem because the root is rotten. Abolition is the only path forward — not just tearing down cages, but building new worlds where care, community, and collective safety replace punishment and control.

An Intersectional Lens: Abolition-Feminism

Black feminist abolition insists that the criminal legal system cannot be understood without examining how multiple systems of oppression intersect to criminalize survival. Kaba (2021) asserts that the system weaponizes anti-Blackness, patriarchy, and classism to punish those who are forced into situations where harm becomes a means of survival. Kaba explains that Black women are never afforded the benefit of innocence; when they defend themselves, they are punished more harshly than their white counterparts. Her work underscores that the more marginalized a person is, the more vulnerable they are to violence and criminalization. Richie (2012) builds on this by exposing how Black women survivors of intimate partner violence are betrayed by both the state and mainstream feminist movements. Richie argues that while white feminists often rely on carceral solutions, Black women are disproportionately harmed by those same solutions. She shows how Black women calling for help are met with arrest, and how their experiences are ignored in policy conversations. Richie centers the voices of Black women who have been criminalized for surviving, calling for a feminist movement that refuses to partner with the carceral state.

Thuma (2024) situates these realities in a long history of abolitionist feminist organizing. Thuma documents how Black, Brown, and queer women resisted carceral feminist frameworks, building community responses to violence that rejected state intervention. Her work emphasizes that these grassroots movements developed models of transformative justice long before they gained academic attention. Thuma's history affirms that Black feminist

abolition is not new but part of an ongoing legacy of collective resistance and care. Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie (2022) unite these arguments in a collective declaration that feminism and abolition are inseparable. The authors show that any feminist movement that does not confront carcerality will perpetuate violence against the most marginalized. Their work demonstrates that abolition-feminism centers those who are most impacted by state violence—Black women, trans women, poor women—and prioritizes solutions grounded in community, rather than state punishment.

Carruthers (2019) demands that intersectional abolitionist movements elevate Black queer and trans leadership. Carruthers critiques respectability politics and insists that liberation must be grounded in radical love, joy, and collective healing. Her work echoes the voices of Black women who have long said that safety cannot come from systems built on their destruction. Kendall (2020) reinforces that intersectionality cannot be rhetorical; it must address material needs. Kendall's critique of mainstream feminism shows that ignoring poverty, food insecurity, and housing instability is a betrayal of marginalized women. She reminds abolitionist movements that without addressing these material conditions, calls for justice remain hollow. Together, these works amplify the voices of Black women demanding that abolitionist struggles be intersectional and collective. The criminal legal system criminalizes survival, and only through centering the experiences of the most marginalized can true justice and liberation be achieved.

We Transformation Society Collectively Never Individually

Abolition is the only answer, but abolition takes everyone, not just a small group of people. Black feminist abolition insists that transformation is only possible through collective action that challenges carceral thinking at every level. Herzing and Piché (2024) makes clear that abolition requires collective, systemic effort rather than individual reforms. They detail how communities must be mobilized to build accountability structures that challenge disposability and punishment. Their analysis focuses on how abolition is both a structural change and a cultural shift that relies on dismantling carceral logics embedded in everyday life. Cullors (2022) extends this argument by providing practical frameworks for abolitionist organizing. Cullors emphasizes that abolitionist work requires radical vulnerability, intentional practice, and a commitment to cultivating community care. She highlights how interpersonal transformation —

learning to respond to harm without punishment — mirrors and supports the political work of dismantling carceral systems.

Brown (2020) adds another dimension to this discussion, addressing the internal dynamics of movements and the dangers of replicating carceral punishment through call-out and cancel culture. Brown challenges abolitionists to embody transformative justice in every aspect of their organizing, refusing to dispose of people who cause harm but instead holding them accountable in ways that foster growth and healing. She calls for collective processes that reflect the values of abolition, emphasizing that true transformation occurs when entire communities are invested in each other's well-being and growth. Together, these works show that abolition is not something carried out by a few leaders but requires sustained, collective participation by entire communities. The movement demands an intentional restructuring of relationships, daily habits, and political structures that reject state violence and center collective liberation.

Conclusion

The voices of Black women have spoken clearly, repeatedly, and with urgency: the criminal legal system was not built to protect us, and it cannot be reformed into something that will. Across history and scholarship, the evidence is undeniable — Black women's survival is criminalized, their voices erased, and their communities targeted by carceral systems designed to control rather than care. Black feminist abolition is not a theoretical exercise; it is a roadmap created by those who have been most harmed by these systems and who have dared to imagine something better. This essay has drawn from the work of Black feminist thinkers who refuse to accept incremental reform or surface-level change. They demand that we listen — not passively, but actively. Listening means taking Black women's experiences as central, not peripheral. It means understanding that the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, and transphobia are not academic concepts but lived realities that shape who gets to survive, who is punished for surviving, and who is deemed expendable by the state.

The call to action is clear: abolition is the only answer. But abolition cannot happen in silence or through the work of a few. It requires collective commitment to building new systems of care, safety, and accountability. It requires unlearning punishment, resisting disposability, and centering the voices and leadership of Black women. We must reject carceral feminism, reject superficial reforms, and refuse to look away from the violence that the state

continues to inflict on Black women and their communities. To scholars, policymakers, organizers, and every person reading this: you are called to listen to Black women and to act on what you hear. Our voices are not new. We have been speaking, writing, resisting, and building. The question is whether the world is finally ready to hear us — not as footnotes or exceptions, but as the central architects of a future where liberation, care, and justice are possible. The time for listening, learning, and acting in solidarity is now. The future we need is already being imagined and built by Black women; the rest of society must follow their lead.

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