



Written in collaboration with and on behalf of the Abolitionist Book Club

The Abolitionist Book Club (ABC) is a project supported by The Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies (SCCS), founded by a collective of current and former Sussex PhD Researchers. The project's central theme, abolitionism, is a call to abolish institutions of state coercion, such as police, prisons, psychiatric detention, detention centres, borders, arms and the military. The Abolition Book Club works to provide space for those wanting to think, learn and act collectively.

Davis, Dent, Meiners and Richie propose that;

“Abolition feminism is a praxis—a politically informed practice—that demands intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression.” (*Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, 2022)

While we had originally formed as a book club, the call to abolitionism-as-praxis moved to the fore, challenging our initial focus on text and epistemologies. As early career academics at a time of unprecedented local and international instability, we understand abolitionism to be a practice of collective undoing, addressing power structures within ourselves, our work and our actions. Within this practice, meetings instead focussed on workshops, sharing of knowledge, and collective work. This paper aims to highlight the ongoing conversations from our sessions. It is an invitation to dialogue.

Sessions to Date

Our first session started the Abolitionist Book Club with an exploration of Palestinian liberation practices. In this session, we delved into structures of violence under settler-colonial occupation, and Palestinian feminist and collectivist cultural resistance, including protest, film, literature, embroidery, and other creative practices. As part of this session, we also reflected on instances in which we police ourselves in our everyday, university and personal lives.

Our second session in December 2023 invited participants to brainstorm further approaches to abolitionism and design future sessions. This meeting engaged in informal but crucial discussions around aspects of abolitionist organising and invited all members to reflect on and co-create the direction of the 'book club'. This festive open house session brought together a large group of people interested in shaping the direction of the book club.



ABOLITIONIST BOOK CLUB SUSSEX CENTRE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

SESSION ONE: PALESTINIAN LIBERATION AND ABOLITIONIST FRAMEWORKS 24 NOVEMBER IN FULTON 208, 4-6PM



ABOUT THIS SESSION

We will begin with an opening session on Palestine and abolition of mass civilian punishment and imprisonment systems, through case studies on non-violent Palestinian abolitionist, feminist and collectivist activism - both under occupation and in the diaspora. The session is facilitated by Research Associate Dr Joy Stacey, and designed around knowledge exchange and a workshop. To facilitate our conversations, we have recommended reading Chapter Two and Chapter Eight from the book *Freedom is a constant struggle*, although it is not essential to have read before attending.

ABOUT THE ABOLITIONIST BOOK CLUB

The SCCS abolitionist book club is running from November 2023 to June 2024. The project's central theme, abolitionism, is a call to abolish institutions of state coercion, such as police, prisons, psychiatric detention, detention centres, borders, arms and the military. It hopes to provide space for those wanting to think, learn, and act together. The sessions will run once a month and comprise of reading, information sharing, discussion and workshops. They are open to anyone searching for tools to create a future in which state violence, coercion, incarceration and criminalisation does not exist. Come along and be part of the collective.

Covid safety precautions and accessibility info will be sent out ahead of the event.



ABOLITIONIST BOOK CLUB SUSSEX CENTRE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

Session Two: Cultural Activism and Abolitionist practice

January 26th Fulton 214, University of Sussex, 4-6

Our second session will investigate intersections of cultural activism and abolitionism. Cultural activism in its simplest form is the production of cultural signifiers and actions with intention to disrupt or rupture systems of oppression or promote social change. This session will investigate the practice of cultural activism with a presentation and workshop facilitated by Nadia Buysse. As always, there is no actual mandatory reading or texts being directly discussed, but rather knowledge and experiences being shared.

ABOUT THE ABOLITIONIST BOOK CLUB

The SCCS Abolitionist Book Club is a collective exchanging knowledge around abolitionism; or a call to abolish institutions of state coercion, such as Police, prisons, and detention centers. It hopes to provide space for those wanting to think, learn, and act together. The sessions will run once a month and comprise of reading, information sharing, discussion and workshops. They are open to anyone searching for tools to create a future in which state violence, coercion, incarceration, and criminalization does not exist. Be a part of the collective.

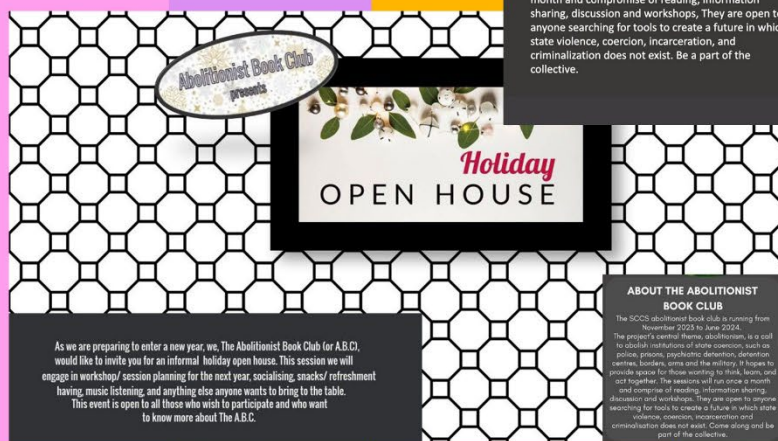
Suggested resources you
can engage with for this session:

We do this till we Free Us
Mariam Kaba

Freedom is a Constant Struggle
Angela Y Davis

Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism
Book by Nadya Tolokannikova

Riot Days
Book by Maria Alyokhina



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The following session then built upon our previous discussions around cultural activism and abolitionist practice. This session further developed our understanding of the relationship between the two and how cultural activism can disrupt and rupture systems of oppression and promote social change, overlapping with previously discussed ways of cultural forms of Palestinian resistance. Here, the focus was specifically on exploring forms of resistance through music.

Starting with a screening of the short film ‘Kill the cop inside your head’ produced by spoken word artist, Subira Joy, our fourth session was centred around the question what does it mean to kill the cop inside your head? Collaborating in small groups, we discussed where elements and centres of policing can be found in our everyday lives. The second half of the session then built on this question in the context of gender-based violence and how abolitionism might help us redefine concepts such as safety and accountability. This session examined previously explored discussions around policing structures and alternative systems of care and closed with a spoken word performance as well as space to reflect on our discussions through movement and creative writing exercises.

At the beginning of our fifth workshop, we opened with a discussion on what money means to us to process our own proximity to the carceral nature of economic precarity. Our first activity was a sematic drawing exercise responding to the question how does money make you feel? This invited us to explore the constructed nature of money, its ability to structure life and choices, and the different feelings it evokes in us. After our discussions, the session connected this to abolitionist responses to and carcerality around the current cost-of-living crisis in the UK with a specific focus on criminalisation of shoplifting and increased surveillance in supermarkets.

Our latest session drew connections to previous session around alternative systems of care and community accountability through the lens of Indigenous Māori communities. This included a film screening of the omnibus film Waru (2017) that was directed by eight female Māori directors. The session aimed to draw connections between abolitionism and fictional portrayals of how communities deal with acts of violence and collectively process community trauma. In our discussions after the film, we further explored the connection between cultural activism, filmmaking and approaches to community care and accountability.

Open Ended Reflections

Venues

Part of the organising of ABC has entailed many lengthy conversations about the project’s location. Our initial consideration was where to host the project. The group consensus was to look beyond the university campus in the hope that a local community venue in Brighton would offer a warm invitation to those who are not affiliated with the university. Although several venues welcomed the project, they also came with a fee, and our searches were consistently brought back to the age-old question: ‘How are we going to fund this?’. Our decision to move the project onto campus was underpinned by a shared unwillingness to ask attendees for an entry fee. However, the search for a suitable and affordable (preferably free!) venue continues because as a site of structural violence, the university campus can be uninviting, and unsafe for marginalised groups.

FROM THE HOME TO THE STREETS: KILL THE COP INSIDE YOUR HEAD

Session Three | Subira Joy and Baljit Kaur

In the first half of the session, join us for a screening of the short film 'Kill the cop inside your head' produced by spoken word artist, Subira Joy. This will be followed by a workshop asking:

What does it mean to 'kill the cop inside your head'?

In the second half of the session, we consider this question in the context of gender-based violence, and how it might help us to redefine safety. Through a collaborative spoken word performance and poetry writing activities, we ask ourselves:

What does a collective commitment to creating alternative systems of care look like?

Suggested Resources:

Book: Schulman, S. (2016)
Chapter 3 in 'Conflict is not Abuse':
Overstating Harm, Community
Responsibility and the Duty of Repair'

Book: Davis, Angela Y ; Dent, Gina ;
Meiners, Erica R ; Richle, Beth E (2021)
Abolition.Feminism.Now

Friday 1st March 24
Fulton 212
University of Sussex
4-6pm

ABOLITIONIST BOOK CLUB
SUSSEX CENTRE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

Abolitionist Book Club Film Afternoon

Join us for an afternoon watching and discussing *Waru* (2017)

Thursday, 25 April from 4pm
in Fulton 106

MONEY/ABOLITION

Session 4 - Nadia Buyse and Charlotte Fraser

Friday 22nd March 24
Fulton 111, University of Sussex
3-5pm

In the first half of the session, join us to reflect on abolitionist responses to the "Cost of Living Crisis." Where does carcerality show up in the crisis and what is being done about it?

This will be followed by a workshop inviting participants to engage with embodied practices in order to process feelings around the cost of living crisis and our own proximity to the carceral nature of economic precarity.

Suggested resources:
Chapter 1 of *The Precariat* by
Guy Standing

'Turbulent Rhetorics in Keith
Hennessy's
*Turbulence: A Dance About the
Economy*' by Lynette Hunter
'Introduction' to *The New Jim
Crow* by Michelle Alexander

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SUSSEX CENTRE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

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Solidarity, care and accountable spaces

At the start of the academic year, 2023, we began pooling together our ideas for the sessions, drawing on our different areas of research and experiences more broadly. Shortly after in October, we witnessed the terrible loss of life across Palestine and Israel and the rapid onset of genocide. Our organising paused as we prioritised taking to the streets in protest and in solidarity. It is in these events that our collective care for each other solidified, whether over the phone or on the streets; and it is this mutual care that we try to embed firmly in the project. Amidst the escalating violence, we felt it was imperative to begin our first session of the project on Palestinian liberation and abolitionist frameworks.

The sensitive nature of topics emerging in our project prompted us to ask and discuss important questions about the kind of space we are collectively creating. Accompanying these thought-provoking conversations, we had a selection of snacks thanks to our 'snack lord' (a designated person who buys the snacks). Safety is crucial to the ethos of the project in terms of how we look after ourselves and each other. In the second session we unpacked what it meant to create a 'safe space' and whether it is achievable in the context of this shared learning environment. Safe spaces ensure that a person or a group of people will not be exposed to discrimination, harassment or emotional or physical harm. Recognising that we can't predict the behaviours, thoughts and triggers of others (and sometimes ourselves), we agreed on providing summaries of the sessions in advance, so attendees know what to expect.

Additionally, rather than promising safety, we encourage and embrace an accountable space. A space where the process of learning can be uncomfortable and where we hold ourselves and each other responsible for words and actions. It means learning, growing, and making mistakes in that process, and accepting responsibility for them. With this shared sentiment in mind, the project welcomes anyone wanting to think, learn and act together.

Growing the collective: An Invitation

A huge part of the learning in this project derives from the different topics, perspectives and approaches brought to the sessions. As the project is evolving, we are thinking about how to reach and develop a wider network both in London and Brighton: people who align with abolitionist thinking, people who want to learn more, people who want to facilitate sessions, people who want to organise. If this resonates with you, or you have thoughts and ideas you want to share, get in touch with us.

This is an invitation for you to join the collective!



We hope to see you for our final session on The Alternative and Abolition!

Thursday 16th May, room TBC *Please keep an eye on SCCS emails for updates*

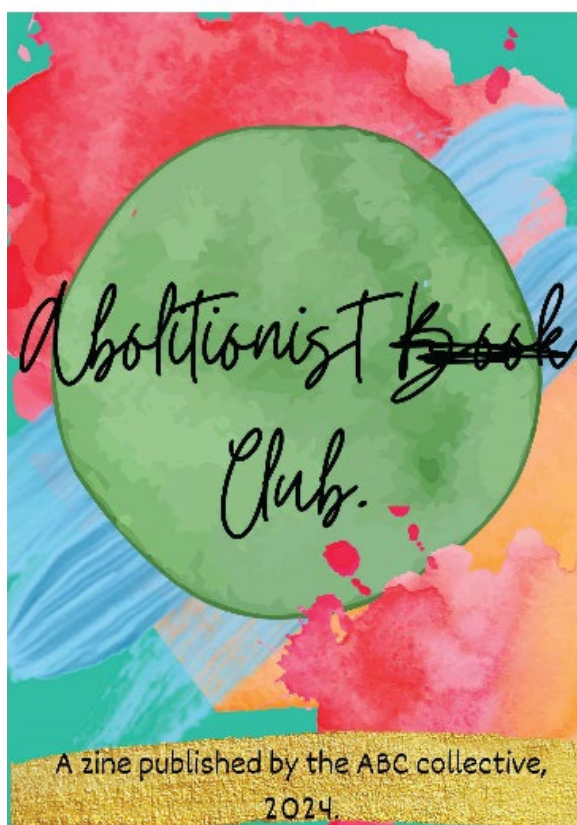
That there were and are alternative forms of freedom to the ones offered in racial capitalism is not generally up for debate, at least in critical branches of scholarship and popular culture. Nonetheless, how and where alternatives have persisted in culture is less clear. In this session of the Abolitionist Book Club, we are going to be talking about what the alternative is, how it got lost, where we might find it, and how it relates to contemporary abolitionism.



Listen to our abolitionist playlist [here](#).



View our Abolitionist Book Club zine [here](#), where you can find snippets of some of our sessions so far.



Readings

- Alcoff, L. (1988). *Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory*. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13(3), pp.405–436.
- Alekhina, M. (2017). *Риот дайс / Riot days*. Пенгвин Букс, Sankt-Peterburg: Penguin Books.
- Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.
- Ben-Moshe, L. (2020). *Decarcerating Disability : Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition*. University Of Minnesota Press.
- Bernard, A. (2017). *Cultural activism as resource: Pedagogies of resistance and solidarity*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53(3), pp.367–379.
- Blair, K. (2021). *Empty Gestures: Performative Utterances and Allyship*. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 35(2), pp.53–73.
- Creative Interventions. (2012). *Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence* (Online). Available from: <https://www.creative-interventions.org/toolkit/>
- Davis, A. (2003). *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Davis, A. (2016). *Freedom is a constant struggle : Ferguson, Palestine, and the foundations of a movement*. Haymarket Books.
- Davis, A.Y., Dent, G., Meiners, E.R. and Richie, Beth. E. (2022). *Abolition. Feminism. Now*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Day, A. S. and McBean, S. O. (2022) 'Abolition Revolution' Pluto Press, London.
- Hayes, K. and Kaba, M. (2023). *Let This Radicalize You*. Haymarket Books.
- Kaba, M. (2021). *We Do This Till We Free Us*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Tolokonnikova, N. (2020). *READ AND RIOT : a pussy riot guide to activism*. S.L.: Coronet Books.
- Waru. (2017). [Film]. Dir. Ainsley Gardiner; Casey Kaa; Renae Maihi; Awanui Simich-Pene; Briar Grace Smith; Paula Whetu Jones; Chelsea Winstanley; Katie Wolfe. New Zealand: Māori Television.