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# Becoming Abolitionists

A CONVERSATION WITH DERECKA PURNELL

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## FOREWORD BY THE FLETCHER FORUM

Police reform? Leave it aside. Instead, consider “police abolition,” and taste the words. Too radical? Keep reading.

Derecka Purnell’s first book, *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and The Pursuit of Freedom*, published by Astra House Books, was released this fall. Over 285 pages, Purnell gives you considerable reason to question your assumptions about policing. The book follows her path from “growing up calling 911” in a rough neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri, to engaging in protest movements around the country, to advocating for social justice in the halls of her alma mater, Harvard Law School. Purnell puts into words the heartfelt impacts of eviction, discrimination, and brutality felt by people of color and minorities in the United States.

The American conception of “law” is one that aims to carry out “justice,” opening the possibility for conflating the terms. Titles such as “Chief Justice” do not make that any easier. Yet laws are not intrinsically just, and even just laws may be unjustly applied. In considering the laws

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**Derecka Purnell** is a lawyer, organizer, and author of *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom*. She works to end police and prison violence by providing legal assistance, research, and training in grassroots organizations through an abolitionist framework. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Purnell co-created the COVID-19 Policing Project at the Community Resource Hub for Safety Accountability to track police arrests, harassment, citations and other enforcement through public health orders related to the pandemic. She received her JD from Harvard Law School, her BA from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and studied public policy and economics at the University of California-Berkeley as a Public Policy and International Affairs Law Fellow. Her writing has been published widely, including in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Boston Review*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. Purnell has lectured, studied, and strategized around social movements across the United States, The Netherlands, Belgium, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Australia. She is currently a columnist at *The Guardian*, a Margaret Burroughs Fellow for the Social Justice Initiative's Portal Project at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and a Scholar-in-Residence at Columbia Law School.

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of the land—those that define citizens as legal subjects and regulate their behavior—one should seek to understand the rationale behind the legislation. For instance, who benefits from bans on jaywalking, homelessness, and masks?

A second dogma of great importance is that of *lex uno ore omnes alloquitur*, or equality before the law. Laws must apply and be enforced equally among legal subjects. From the perspective of organizers and participants in movements such as Black Lives Matter, this is a principle that the United States systematically fails to uphold in practice.

Nor is law enforcement the best answer to handle all malaises of society, including the feeling of danger. This speaks to the heart of the matter. Purnell deconstructs the notion of “policing” and shows—eloquently and thoroughly—how the American police system can be traced down to the protection of slave trade. Of equal poignance, Purnell demonstrates how the police have been empowered to respond to deep-rooted issues beyond delinquency, and in the same manner, serve to protect interests vested in socioeconomic inequality and patriarchy along racial lines. If you have ever wondered what intersectionality looks like in practice, Derecka’s book provides an excellent roadmap.

What kind of society do citizens of the United States want in the future? What purposes do Americans want their institutions to serve?

To poise our readers better to confront these questions, The Fletcher Forum has interviewed a breakout author who is impacting the contemporary public debate on social justice, police, and race. Purnell’s words echo the likes of Toni Morrison, Roxane Gay, and Claudia Rankine. Starting with *Becoming Abolitionists*, Derecka is set to become one of America’s most influential contemporary voices on social justice.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Derecka, you have written a memoir as your debut publication. It is clearly personal, and blends stories of your upbringing with advocacy and nonfiction. Why this book, this genre, and why now?*

**DERECKA PURNELL:** I hate calling this book a memoir. It makes me so uneasy. And it is so funny when I talk to people, and at least with people who have read it before, because they call it different things. One reviewer just called it an intellectual autobiography that is actually not committed specifically to the genre—this being a memoir—especially since it focuses on such a narrow part of my life and my political development.

But why this book, why this way? I think that I did the very cliché approach aspiring writers often hear, usually attributed to Toni Morrison,

which is “*write the book that you have wanted to read if it doesn’t exist yet.*” I wanted to write something that blended genres and offered some historical challenge to policing, something that shows abolition was not always as politicized, that it took struggle, humility, curiosity and experimentation, and that becoming an abolitionist required being pushed by people who thought more creatively and more radically about the world than I did. So I tried to put a lot of those encounters, realizations, and awakenings into this text, in a way that marked some moments that were pivotal for me, and some moments that were also pivotal for lots of other people who consider themselves abolitionists today.

I hope, through that process, through that journey, that these people will recognize that some people who have some relative visibility around abolition were not always abolitionists. They were actually quite antagonistic to it or even organized to get people arrested. And so, through that process, I wanted to show how we came to the struggle of what abolition is, and how we continue to struggle with it.

I think of the police as the intentional creation of a force that is responsible for mitigating and controlling inequality, capitalism, racism, ableism, immigration, and homophobia. We see police manage all these populations that are affected under these different categories. And so it’s going to be impossible to provide an alternative to policing without even thinking about undermining capitalism, undermining homophobia, racism, transphobia. These are the reasons why we have police.

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**FORUM:** *What are the paradigms that underpin these alternatives to policing? And how do you think we can cultivate the conditions that are necessary for such alternatives to exist?*

**PURNELL:** I am much less interested in cultivating an alternative to policing, because that just assumes that police are inherently the problem, and not just societies with police. That is one of the key arguments I have tried to demonstrate in the book.

In Chapter Seven—the chapter on disability justice—this person called Dustin was convinced of crisis responders for people who are experiencing particular mental health episodes as an alternative to policing. And it is through Dustin’s realization that, “Oh, wow, the people who are ascending, who are supposedly experts in mental health crisis training, are still hurting people. They are still arresting people.” Dustin realizes that they are still committing so much violence.

It is not as if we can simply get rid of police and replace them with an alternative institution. Because whatever that alternative institution will be, we would just replicate the so many parts of policing that we are trying to eradicate. I do not see policing as an isolated institution that is broken. Rather, policing is simply part of a larger criminal justice system that is broken.

I think of police as the intentional creation of a force that is responsible for mitigating and controlling inequality, capitalism, racism, ableism, immigration, and homophobia. We see the police manage all these populations that are affected under these different categories. And so, it is going to be impossible to provide an alternative to policing without even thinking about undermining capitalism, undermining homophobia, racism, or transphobia. These are the reasons why we have police. I think one major paradigm, for me at least—and one I try to write about in this book—is just reconfiguring what sort of society we are living in. Why do we have such levels of high exploitation, such levels of inequality, such levels of racism? Why, among all of these systems, only the police can manage the fallout?

In this book, I have tried to think about each chapter like climate justice and disability justice as well as thinking about sexual violence and murder, how these came to be in the first place, because police ultimately cannot manage these issues. And neither can an alternative to policing, and we have to eradicate those harms in the first place. Thank you for that question.

**FORUM:** *Oh, you are very welcome, and thank you for that answer. This brings us back to paradigms and ways people try to change systems. One of these is through increasing representation. There is an example you give in the book about Judge Chun, as an example of the first Korean American prosecutor and first Korean American judge, where you contend that having more “firsts” does*

*not necessarily improve the system. From an advocacy standpoint, how can we talk about representation as necessary but not sufficient? Also, calling for more representation seems to have reached the mainstream without any proper interrogation of what the presence of diversity means in practice. Are you able to comment on that?*

**PURNELL:** Of course. So, one way I have tried to think about representation in the criminal legal system is that, with an absence of diversity, it is much easier to prove that the system is racist. That does not mean that the presence of diversity means that the system is just.

We can look at all sorts of countries with institutions that are fundamentally unjust, but which feature representation from the people who have belonged to the groups who are most afflicted by the unjust institutions.

I will give my most recent favorite example. There is this interview with Meghan Markle, the Duchess. And in this interview, she is speaking to Oprah, and she is so distraught. And she is saying, “I thought that the Commonwealth would be excited to have a woman of color as Duchess, just because the Commonwealth is so diverse with all of these people who belong to the spoils of the UK.”

Well, one reason why the Commonwealth is so diverse is because Britain had been conquering all these countries in the Caribbean, in Africa, and in North America. So it is not the diversity that is good, because the UK’s diversity is not so celebratory. Rather, the Empire has become diverse because of conquest, colonialism, and war. And so that is where you are precisely right. Drawing attention to that diversity has not added much value to British institutions.

Lots of students, lots of people, have literally fought and struggled for the right to be included into a broader system that has been predicated on their exclusion to some extent. And that makes me think of two things.

It makes me think of the MLK quote, that he feared that he was integrating his people into a burning house. And it also makes me think about Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor’s book *Race for Profit*, where she introduced this concept of *predatory inclusion*. She uses it to explain how the U.S. housing system was created to “benefit” Black people. But the manner in which they were included—to be representative in the system—led to such predation, which in return led to the exploitation of Black people in the housing crisis, further segregation, and further concentration of inequality.

So, diversity is not inherently good. You know, plantations were diverse. There were all different kinds of people living on plantations, right? There were white, Indigenous, and Black peoples. But we do not think about plantations that way, because plantations were sites of violence.

So, what ultimately matters is the power dynamics. People have different relationships to power, and they have different relationships to freedom. And sometimes, we are so excited about diversity that it obscures the fact that some people keep the same amount of power—regardless of their skin color—if they are in oppressive systems.

So how can we disrupt these power dynamics? Increased diversity is not inherently doing that, which is why you have Black Council leaders in New York City that are trying to get support for fighting the NYPD by saying, “Look, we want inclusion.” Another example is all the police unions across the country: there is a traditional police union, an African American police union, a Latinx police union. And it’s like, if diversity was enough, then why do even these cops think they need their own representation via different units?

So the whole system is just a mess. It is all a mess, and diversity is not going to save it.

**FORUM:** *Let us briefly touch on the permissibility of violent resistance, Derecka. Malcolm X discussed the idea of any means necessary, including violence. In the colonial context, there was Franz Fanon who suggested that violence is a legitimate means of colonial resistance. In that regard, to what extent does the abolitionist agenda, if at all, understand violence as a legitimate response to police brutality?*

**PURNELL:** I can’t speak on behalf of all abolitionists, nor can I say there is a singular abolitionist agenda. I think that abolition is a paradigm that people determine and figure out and struggle for what it means in a particular context in our particular time.

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So, for example, historically, a lot of the people who we call abolitionists were typically orators such as Frederick Douglass, people who used to go and give speeches and explain the horrors of slavery. However, the people used violence in order to eradicate slavery were considered *insurrectionists* because they were willing to engage in violent measures.

And it’s like, they were also abolitionists, too, but their means is not usually the way that we think about the abolition. We call it an insurrection, we call it a slave rebellion, we call it an uprising. But one thing I think

is important is that different organizers who I know and who are struggling with abolition have different relationships to violence, different relationships to nonviolent direct action, and different relationships to peace. I know abolitionists who are pacifists as well as abolitionists who believe in violence and revolutionary struggle. I know people who are in the middle.

And so, I don't know if there is one concrete way, especially since abolition is just one paradigm of thinking in the world, and it may support or may collide with other paradigms that you hold dear. And so, I don't even know if there is an abolitionist agenda, and I am not on their email list. If you know of one, please add me to it.

**FORUM:** *So it is not just about police abolition, but it is about changing the wider structures in society. In your book, you write about your trips to the Netherlands, Mozambique, and South Africa. And you discuss briefly their institutions, with historical contexts of law enforcement as being linked to slavery. A critique that we would expect you to receive for this book is “oh, but there are other countries which have much fewer police casualties.” So, are there specific links between your take on police abolition and decolonization?*

**PURNELL:** Yes, yes. I love this question because it was an argument that I used to make: “look, look at all these other countries in Europe, they have way fewer police killings every year than the United States,” which is true, and it is something I think is important. But then my metric of success changed.

It was not that I became committed to a reduction in police killings *only*. I started asking other types of questions, such as the purpose of policing. And so I think that fewer police killings is insufficient. For instance, for a country to solely aspire to have fewer police killings is insufficient when police continue to carry out mass evictions, all over the country, every day.

I do not think of fewer police killings as an aspirational goal. Because the police are still going to show up to break up union strikes, or they are going to show up to threaten people with arrest because they are undocumented, or because people are sleeping on a bench.

And so, at one particular point, police killings became the singular most galvanizing factor for my relationship to struggle around police violence. As I started to learn more about colonization and capitalism, I realized that police serve a more terrible road to maintaining those two systems, and police killings are symptomatic of these larger problems that police help to maintain.

For example, when I talk about being in the Netherlands, it is true

that they have significantly fewer killings there than in the United States. It is also true that the Netherlands has way fewer guns per capita than the U.S. does. There are more guns than people in the United States. And so that is just one example where the context and the circumstances are different. When I started talking to people who were from North Africa and Syria, who were immigrants—second and third generation, teenagers—who say “well, police might not be killing us, but they condone our harassment, they police us, and they interfere with our freedoms, and our fun, and our joy, and our love.”

Is that the kind of society we want? While the fatalities may have dropped, people are still living in fear. They are looking over their shoulders, their houses can be raided, and they can be immediately separated from the people who they share a home with. I’m not sure if that’s the aspiration we seek as a society. And so, abolition initially seemed like a great viable option because of this fatal force, this fatal violence that comes from the police.

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But then there are these other paradigms, like decolonization, or people fighting against capitalism. It made me realize that there is so much more to life that we should be fighting for, and the reduction of fatalities is just one metric.

So how can we make sure that we have a society where people can thrive, where there are not these levels of exploitation, where the suffering that happens is accidental and necessary—instead of what we have today, which only has the police to manage all these other systems?

In your book, you make a very clear link between law enforcement and the institution of slavery, drawing on your experiences and understanding of the United States. So in that regard, how do we understand this project of becoming abolitionist beyond the U.S. context? How does policing and becoming abolitionist appear on a universal scale? Or is abolitionism a uniquely American struggle, given that direct lineage back to how slavery manifested in the United States?

That is a really good and specific question. “Uniquely American” is complicated, especially for the history of slavery that I have tried to present in Chapter Two. So many of the early policing systems were molded after one [other] police force and adopted by others in the Caribbean. For instance, the system in Barbados was first put in place by Spain and then adopted by the UK. Then they were shared as “best practices” in South Carolina. So, from its inception, policing has been an international and not a uniquely



American project—nor was slave trade a “uniquely American” project. The slave trade has also had such lasting impacts on the entire continent of Africa. So I think that it is so very important to not think about policing just as a “uniquely American” problem because of the repressive aspects of its formation.

*So, from its inception, policing has been an international and not a uniquely American project—nor was slave trade a “uniquely American” project.*

But there is also the resistance to it. When there were all these uprisings in the Caribbean where white plantation owners fled and sought refuge, some went to Haiti and to Louisiana, or they were leaving to Barbados, other parts of the Caribbean, [or] they were going to the Carolinas.

And some of them were bringing people they enslaved with them. And those enslaved people also brought knowledge of resistance, and knowledge of rebellion that they shared with people who primarily had been enslaved in the United States.

The police, the oppressors, the colonizers, the plantation owners, and land proprietors were sharing tactics that created the modern police force. But then you also had the enslaved, the rebels who were also sharing ideas and knowledge on how to get free. So for me this is exciting, not just because it expands what we take policing to be, but because it also expands how we think of solidarity and resistance, and that transcends borders.

And these people—the rebels—got so powerful that American states started banning the importation of slaves from resisting Caribbean colonies. It is funny to think of them as refugees, because when these white slave owners were fleeing these rebellions, they were treated like refugees. And then states had to pass *laws that banned them from bringing slaves* because the slaves would share knowledge of how to organize rebellions, and they would all fear that this knowledge would spread.

And so I think that’s very, very, powerful. And I think a lot of that solidarity often gets less focus because so much of it is on the American policing system despite it being born in this context. And so was that resistance.

**FORUM:** *There was a quote that we found very interesting on page 97, where you discuss the notion of freedom before the abolition of slavery. You write, “white people were not free, but they were bound to rotten fruits of slavery, colonialism and genocide, and found culture and identity and flags, borders and badges.” To what extent do you think this still holds true? are white people still referent of institutions built on subjugation, slavery and colonialism?*

**PURNELL:** Yes, yes, yes. Oh, man, there is so much to say about that. I really need to unpack that statement further in the book, but I guess it is too late now. Let me be very, very clear about one thing.

That statement does not suggest that every single white person is bound to those particular things, right. That is not the argument that I am making. What I am trying to say is that the level of patriotism, commitment to capitalism, and the colonialism that formed the land that became the United States were very, very intertwined with what it meant to be white. It is still seen today through our laws, through the names of Confederate soldiers that still are lined up across our streets, in the Pledge of Allegiance, in our most sacred documents, the Founding Fathers. It is carved on top of the sacred, Native monuments and marked over as Mount Rushmore, and all these things are so inherent.

But I think that there are incredible traditions of white people who try to resist that. The default answer is always, like, “look at John Brown,” but there is a history of all kinds of white people being in solidarity with the struggle and people who are resisting those symbols, resisting those borders, badges, and flags.

But these white people are typically condemned, or they are treated as outside agitators. They are treated as Antifa, as if they are going against the American project when they call into question borders, badges, and flags.

But for white people who decide to be in solidarity with borders, badges, and flags, to be that particular type of patriot, what do they do? They are lifted up, they’re celebrated, they are loud. And so do I think that culture remains today? Absolutely. Do I think that people feel threatened by calling it into question? Absolutely. Do I think only white people feel threatened by it? Absolutely not.

I think there are lots of people of color, unfortunately, who also have the same level of commitment to badges, borders, and flags, because they have benefited—to some relative margin—from the colonizer capitalist project that created the United States. And that those people have to be called out too. It is critical of Black leadership in the United States government.

But yes, I do think that many of those elements hold true today. Maybe in the past, it was more about flags. Today, I think it is the mask debate, right? It is about “who gets to wear a mask?” Who is that? Who are signing laws banning masks from being worn by children in elementary school? Who is that? Who’s doing that? It is not necessarily white people, but the identity derived from a social construct—whiteness—and the project to maintain that identity at all costs that I am critical of.

**FORUM:** *So, this is a good question to end on, because it really just zooms us out on these sorts of things we have been discussing and looks at something your book touches on more substantively. You have a quote that really directs the reader away from this laser focus on abolition as synonymous with “just getting rid of the police.”*

*You write that, “rather than thinking of abolition as just getting rid of police, I think about it as a way to create and support a multitude of approaches to the problem of harm in society, and most excitingly as an opportunity to reduce and eliminate harm in the first place.”*

*Going off of that, what can some of these opportunities to eliminate and reduce harm in society look like? Where can people get started on that mission?*

**PURNELL:** Oh, man. I say, *the first thing* that people should do is to find three other people and start reading books that they will associate with the abolitionist agenda. I would encourage people to join organizations that are trying to figure out how to eliminate the prison industrial complex, those that are trying to defund the police, that are figuring out how to fight against capitalism, or rather, that advance a socialist agenda. And with those people, I would highly encourage them to read, study, and struggle together. Because what you do is really going to depend on your particular context.

For some people, that is through organizing around climate justice or disability justice. Also, some people are joining organizations to fight patriarchy, which is very, very important, because one of the leading causes of murder in this country is through men who are trying to violently control women over their sexuality. So there are so many different ways in which people can plug in that we do not traditionally think about as “abolitionist”.

So, I would encourage people to *find their people*, and figure out how to do that work through an abolitionist paradigm. I cannot just give you one specific answer. Because for me, one of those things it includes is parenting. Sometimes it includes lawyering, writing, [or] art. It really depends on the particular context. But everything that I do, I earnestly try to do with other people through informed analysis, and that is what I hope people will do with this book. *f*