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Mash



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tweet from @prisonculture over the last several years has left me constantly amazed: even from that small window into her life, it's mind-blowing how busy she always seems to be and how engaged in organizing work she is here in Chicago. Aside from founding and directing Project NIA, an organization devoted to ending youth incarceration, Mariame has been instrumental in such advocacy and education initiatives as the Chicago Freedom School, the Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women, We Charge Genocide and others. And even with all that she somehow has time to dispense wisdom to the masses of schmucks like me on the Internet. Mariame graciously agreed to speak with me about her work— a transcript of our conversation follows.

By Dan Sloan

Dan Sloan: There's a quote from you that frames your work in a way I really like. In a November Truthout piece on your contribution to the Feminist Utopia Project you said, "I am actively working toward abolition, which means that I am trying to create the conditions necessary to ensure the

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lum·pen / adj.

1. Of or relating to dispossessed, often displaced people who have been cut off from the socioeconomic class with which they would ordinarily be identified: lumpen intellectuals unable to find work in their fields. A member the underclass, especially the lowest social stratum.

2. Vulgar or common; plebeian

possibility of a world without prisons.” Could you talk about what you see as the necessary conditions for a world without prisons, and how you see your work with Project NIA, including your efforts to promote participatory community justice, as fitting into these conditions?

Mariame Kaba: Sure. I think I should start by saying that while I founded and direct Project NIA, I’m also politically committed to several other projects and organizations, groupings and efforts, that speak to the multiple ways that I see the forces of oppression manifesting themselves, not just in my own personal life but in the lives of other people. So abolition of prisons is one of my political commitments, one of the central commitments that I have, but it is also—the only way that prisons will be abolished is if other things transform and change, too— so I can’t imagine capitalism existing, at least in the way that it is currently configured, and prisons disappearing. I don’t think that’s possible. I don’t think that we can end prisons without having economic justice, racial justice, other forms of justice.

So for my part, I have been trying to think about small projects that I could use to test out my ideas around addressing harm in my particular community, and finding a way through the addressing of that harm to give people options other than thinking of prison or punishment as the main way that we get accountability when people harm us. Project NIA has its roots in a question about how we might build a restorative community that could engender transformative justice. Would it be possible to incubate, catalyze, co-create projects that would test out that theory. And so, over the years we’ve supported projects like Circles and Ciphers, which is a youth-driven hip-hop leadership development program that uses restorative justice at its base to work with young people in conflict with the law, in the Rogers Park community initially but it has expanded beyond that now. And the work with those young people, some of whom are actually diverted from the criminal punishment system through that particular project, it’s a way to try to think through how we might have different spaces in the community so that people who are seen as either having caused harm or are targeted by the state as being harmful, would have an alternative other than the criminal punishment system as it’s set up.

So that’s just one sliver of that. I spent many years also as part of a project called INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and INCITE! has contributed a lot to the thinking about the importance

of inserting an analysis of race and gender within abolitionist spaces and abolitionist politics. So the issue around violence against women, girls and gender nonconforming people, you have to really take that seriously—that no one is going to sign up for the end of prisons, policing and surveillance without feeling like, “Well, we have something else that we can turn to that will bring accountability.” And so INCITE! has spent many years of having people write, think, workshop ideas about how we address harm outside of the current system that we have in place. And those are hard things— difficult, not quick— you know, it’s something that has to involve a whole community of people. It’s not just going to be the individual person versus the state, either the perpetrator or the victim and survivor, who doesn’t really have any real input in making decisions about how they want to have their accountability come down. They kind of have to give away their power to the state to take that on. So what we’re trying to do, and what a big part of my life’s work has been, is to try to reimagine new ways of trying to address accountability and get accountability for survivors of violence.

DS: When one talks about community control of justice, many people would think of a so-called “community policing” program like CAPS. We Charge Genocide, a local group with which you’re involved, put out a great report this past fall arguing that CAPS and similar programs don’t actually lead to substantive changes in the relationships between communities and the police, and that they can actually serve to further marginalize the most vulnerable residents of communities. Can you talk about how you view CAPS and how you’d contrast it with a system that is meaningfully rooted in a community?

MK: Yeah. So CAPS is obviously the Community Alternative Policing System here in Chicago, and the idea behind it was basically to bring the police to the community level in a way that— for example, in Chicago, in CAPS, a lot of the agenda setting, the meetings are run often, by the police themselves. And the CAPS report that you reference, that was put out by CounterCAPS which was part of the umbrella of We Charge Genocide, and written by Brendan McQuade, who took the observations of many of us who attend our CAPS meetings. We have a form we created to take specific notes about what was happening in our CAPS meeting, during, I think it was May to October last year. And the idea was to distill what kinds of conversations happen at that level, what people are talking about in those groups.y

It turns out that a big part of what people are talking about is how to push people out of the community. It's basically to figure out ways to ostracize and evict people from the neighborhood. Not to bring them in and to ask them, "If you are doing x, y, and z that we find undesirable, why are you doing that, and what can we do to mitigate that? What can we do to support you in a different way so that you don't go down this road?" No, it's basically that CAPS becomes the community-based counterinsurgency arm of the police in our communities.

So folks who attend these meetings, they're usually older in certain communities, they're usually people who are homeowners so they're concerned about their properties and their property values. Often they're new arrivals, if you think about people who come to gentrifying communities, they can be younger, new white people who come to gentrify a particular community, they start coming to those meetings to basically have the police do the work they don't want to do. "This person is dealing drugs out of their apartment, you need to talk to the landlord and make sure that person is gone. Young people are outside of our apartment at 12 o'clock at night, they're playing in our alleyway and when we tell them to leave they don't leave, so we want police patrols there now. We want you to be sitting outside our place at midnight. Or, we want you right outside of the school at 3pm because the kids are coming into the store, and maybe some of them have shoplifted, or they're loud, or they keep other people away." We also found in some cases that some of these people have basically been deputized by the police and end up showing up at people's trials and asking for harsher sentences for those people. Which is something that I hadn't seen at my CAPS but apparently it happened at somebody else's, and that was something interesting to learn.

So what you end up with is having neighbors watch other people to inform on them to the police. And that is not rooted in any sort of model of restoration: it's highly punitive, it's focused on surveillance with a purpose of ostracizing and evicting people from their own community. And that's not, in my mind, anything that would fit within a model of transformative justice at all. Very much focused on the traditional ways that we think about handling problems in our communities—punish people, take them out of the community, throw them out, make them disposable.

DS: This might be a good time— I should have asked you this initially, but— could you give a brief overview of how you conceptualize transformative justice?

MK: Sure. So people sometimes use restorative and transformative justice interchangeably. I very specifically mean very different things when I use restorative versus transformative justice. Often restorative justice is very much grounded in individual relationships between individual people, and solving individual conflicts in a way that would not rely on punishment but still afford people the accountability that they want and need as it relates to feeling as though their harms were heard, and acknowledged, and addressed. Restorative justice is very much at the individual level.

And when you talk about transformative justice, at least for myself, what I'm talking about is that individual relationships occur within larger constructs, and there are larger forces that impact our lives, which structure our relationships and our institutions. And so, you have to also fight in a collective way against those forces of oppression. So while you're addressing interpersonal conflicts and while you're trying to make sure that people in communities know each other, have relationships with each other, have some tools to be able to address the issues that come, the harm that people cause. While that's important, you also need to talk about making sure people have living wages so that they have a way to live and aren't having to rely on the illegal or underground economies that are already criminalized to be able to make a living, but that they actually have the ability to take care of their needs. And it's not just a living wage— it might also be that we need to be fighting for guaranteed jobs, or in some cases people like to talk about a basic income.

We also need to be really honest about anti-blackness and anti-black racism and racism in general, and make sure that we're uprooting that form of oppression. We also need to be thinking about how we uproot gender-based oppression. We have to be really intentional about how we deal with disability-related forms of oppression. So you have to be fighting these macro-level forces and where you do that is by doing organizing that builds power among people, and that power that we build we then can be used to push for the changes that we want to see at the macro-level, the

systemic level. So transformative justice says that, yes, we've got to have these individual-level projects and individual-level attempts to address interpersonal harm, but that we'll never be able to solve those personal harms without also doing the macro work, because these things are reinforcing of each other. Because you can't think about gun violence in a city like Chicago— which is a form of interpersonal violence— you can't separate that from the structural reasons this is happening in particular communities and why it happens less in other communities. So transformative justice asks you to marry macro level organizing and analysis of oppression, to doing the work that you need to be doing on the ground on an individual level.

DS: Could you talk a little bit more about your involvement with We Charge Genocide? When I heard the story of the youth delegation to the UN and the stand that they made I was really inspired and I'm sure that's a very gratifying thing to be a part of.

MK: So in May of 2014 a young man named Dominique Franklin, Jr., who was known as Damo by his friends, was tased by the Chicago Police Department. We still don't know very much about what happened. The police department hasn't really divulged very much information. But from reports of witnesses, immediate reports, it was said that they were trying to arrest Dominique out of Walgreens for stealing a pint of liquor or something, and that he was already handcuffed and when he tried to run away, he was tased twice and he fell and hit his head on a pole. He never recovered consciousness; he ended up dying in the hospital a few days after that incident. The reason that matters, at least for my involvement, was that Damo had started to get involved in the group that I mentioned before, Circles and Ciphers, which was a group that my organization, Project NIA, helped catalyze and incubate for several years until they went out on their own a year ago. But he started to get involved with that particular project and he was friends with some of the young people who I also know who are part of Circles and Ciphers. And when he was killed that way by the police, there was so much despondency and a sense of real despair at his loss, I just felt that we needed to do something. And mainly I felt that we needed to do something that would honor Dominique's life and also his legacy and to think about his legacy. And do something that would also serve as a healing opportunity for the community of people who knew him and their friends and others who wanted to join. So I sent out, which I do in the middle of

the night sometimes, an email to some of his friends and others, saying, “Hey, would people want to come together to think about reviving the concept of We Charge Genocide from 1951?”

That We Charge Genocide petition was submitted by black activists, most of whom were affiliated with the Communist Party, so William Patterson and Robeson, and DuBois and Claudia Jones and other luminaries. And basically that petition listed out 150 racialized killings in the US, overwhelmingly police killings. And they wanted to take this petition to the United Nations. The US government went ballistic, they were very scared and worried and did not want this petition to be filed, and they then took Paul Robeson’s passport—his passport had been revoked, he was supposed to go to Paris to the United Nations—so William Patterson took the petition and went to the UN. It turned out that when he got to Paris, all of the petitions that he had had been taken from his suitcase, had been destroyed. He’d been smart, and what he’d done was to mail himself some copies and so he had some, and he went to the United Nations. To this day the UN says that it never got that petition, that it was never filed, which is interesting. And if you know the history of this, the US Information Agency put out their own pamphlet called *The Negro in American Life* that was supposed to be a counter to this indictment of American racism and American anti-blackness.

So I sent that out to folks at the end of May and said, “Do people want to get together and think about doing this, sending a delegation of young people of color to the United Nations to present a revised We Charge Genocide petition?” And people came together, a couple of weeks later we had a meeting in June 2014 at the Chicago Freedom School, which is another organization that I co-founded. And 50 people showed up, which was amazing—so many people were there, and there were all different kinds of people: young artists in the city, young organizers, older activists, lawyers, all sorts of people, who just wanted to come together to support the young people who had lost their friend, but also to make a statement about the nature of police violence against young people of color in Chicago, particularly young black people. So it was from that meeting, that initial gathering, that we ended up deciding— I said at the meeting, very clearly to everybody there, that we didn’t have to do this, we didn’t have to send people to the UN, I was open, I wanted any other suggestions that people had of things that they thought would be useful and good, and if this wasn’t it, then what would it be? Everybody was unanimous about the fact that we

should send folks to the UN, and people said we should also start Cop Watch again, because that had existed here in Chicago. So people were down for that, and people had other ideas of things that we could do together.

So folks from We Charge Genocide wrote that report. It turned out very quickly— we didn't know, but the UN Committee Against Torture meeting was going to be in November [2014]. We were in summer, we thought that we'd be going in the spring of 2015 to the Committee to End Racial Discrimination, but then the UN Committee Against Torture was that November. So we had only a few months to raise \$15,000 to send young people. We initially wanted to send six, but we raised \$20,000 and we ended up sending eight young people of color between the ages of 19 and 28 years old to go to the UN Committee Against Torture [in Geneva]. If you go to wechargegenocide.org you can find a summary of what happened on both days that they were there: the walkout that they engineered, the protest of standing silently with their fists up for 30 minutes, the amount of time that Rekia Boyd laid on the ground when she was killed by Dante Servin in 2012. So there was lots of symbolism.

And what was pretty important for our group, was— before the delegation, everybody who had been before the UN before said, “Do not expect them to name Chicago specifically as a culprit in police violence and torture. Don't expect Damo's name to appear in any of the final documents or concluding remarks. You may or may not get them to ask one of the questions that you want them to ask of the State Department—and it turned out that those young people who went there were amazing. They lobbied individual members, they got so many of their questions asked at the proceedings. When you look at the concluding remarks, they specifically mention two names: Israel Hernandez from Miami Beach and Damo Franklin. They specifically talked about Chicago and our police department, and called them out for torture and violence against young black people and young people of color, the only police department that was specifically named. And you know, Mike Brown's parents from Ferguson had come to that same gathering and made their case on behalf of their son, and Mike Brown's name doesn't appear in the final minutes, nor does the Ferguson Police Department get specifically called out. It just shows the amount of work and energy that those young people put in when they got there, to push that. And from the time they returned, in November 2014, We Charge Genocide continues to organize protests, to support individual

families, to do art projects and programs that bring the issue of policing and violence to the broader community, has co-facilitated and co-organized a huge 350 person conference last January called Watching the Watchers, and was one of the 14 organizations leading the Reparations Now campaign. So all these different pieces of work came out of just going to the United Nations.

I think the delegation brought back a lot of energy to the city. There was a report back in December of 2014 about the trip and it was packed, over 300 people showed up and there were more on the waiting list, to hear from the young people about the experience and what they thought. And one of the things that the concluding remarks of the UN Committee Against Torture also said was that Chicago should pass the reparations ordinance that had been introduced in the fall of 2013. And so, when the young people came back from Geneva, one of the things that we decided was to use the momentum of the UN support in their admonition to the city to pass the reparations ordinance, to give new momentum to that fight. And we were successful in May of this past year, to get the city to pass the reparations ordinance into law. Just this past week, 57 of the remaining survivors of Burge torture receive \$100,000 checks, adding up to \$5.5 million in restitution. That's important, because those people—the statute of limitations had run out for them, and the city had no obligation to give them anything—and they were struggling, many of them. And the thing about the reparations ordinance that's important is that it's an abolitionist document, right? Because it's a document that did not rely on the court, prison, and punishment system, to try to envision a more expansive view of justice.

So while financial restitution was a part of that package, it also did a whole bunch of other things. Free community college education to the survivors, their kids and their grandkids. A public apology for the first time from the city about Burge torture. Provisions for a public memorial about the Burge torture cases. Housing support and employment support for the survivors. CPS will now have to teach about it, and people are working right now on a curriculum that will be taught about the Burge torture cases in eighth and tenth grade social studies classes from now on. So we asked for a whole series of things that we thought would be about rethinking justice for people who have been wronged, survivors of violence that was law enforcement-focused violence. Chicago is the first municipality in history to ever pass a reparations bill for law enforcement violence. So that's something that other cities are looking at for

themselves now, as avenues for justice that are not personal and individual indictments of the police, not calls for cops to be jailed, you know, the same kind of language we hear over and over again out there on the streets in some cases. So that's the long-short version of how We Charge Genocide came into being.

DS: It's really amazing work. Going back to some of the work done by Project NIA, I've seen a wonderful series of reports called Policing Chicago Public Schools, that give information on the criminalization of students in Chicago, and I think this is where I first heard the term, "school-to-prison pipeline." Could you talk about some of the ways that we're hurting students, especially our black students and students of color, by increasing the police presence in schools, and some of the ways that we could better serve them?

MK: Sure. Basically, the definition of the school-to-prison pipeline is all of the different ways that young people, students, find themselves pushed out of school, and then more readily criminalized and sent into the criminal punishment system. There are many ways that manifests itself, there are many forces that lead to it, many institutional factors. One of those is excessive suspensions and expulsions. It is true that young people who are suspended from school are three times more likely to drop out than young people who are not, and this is out of school suspensions in particular. Young people who are expelled, they basically find it difficult to come back and find another school that will accept them, or they decide that they're just done, they decide to drop out. And if we look at the numbers of people in prisons in Illinois who dropped out of high school, I think the number is like, over 50%. So there's a connection there between education and incarceration in more ways than one.

But the school-to-prison pipeline is also, high stakes testing, you know? All of the ways in which the new accountability regimes have come down on individual schools, individual teachers, individual students, to make the curriculum useless to people and not interesting, also causes young people to drop out and also kind of feeds the pipeline to prison and criminalization in general.

One of the things we did when we first started Project NIA— I

mentioned to you before that we had envisioned these different ways that we could impact and create community—we had this peace room, which was at our local elementary school in the community. Initially we were there two-and-a-half days a week. I had a staff person who I hired whose job was to set that place up and be there, she was a licensed professional counselor who was trained in restorative practices. We trained community members to do peacemaking circles, and to go to that school and run that peace room, to be an alternative to suspension and expulsion for students within that particular school. So we were there with the notion that we would be there for two years, and we would kind of set up that space and train up teachers and build capacity in the administration, and then they would be able to run it themselves. What ended up happening was by the time we were leaving that school, at the end of our second year, we were there five days a week. And basically, the person I hired became an employee of that school. Which was not sustainable at all and was not the idea that we had. But the time that we were there we saw less suspension, less expulsion, less arrests of students, which was what we were hoping for. It was much harder to change the culture of punishment in the school— that's a years-long process.

So that was part of our work, was to try to figure that out. And one of the ways we were trying to figure out stuff around policing in schools was to do these reports that would let people know how many arrests were happening within our schools at CPS and to try to track through the years the decrease or increase of those. And those have dramatically decreased over the years, just as juvenile arrests in the city of Chicago in general have dramatically decreased, and arrests of youth across the nation have dramatically decreased over the past few years.

So the school-to-prison pipeline asks you to change the accountability regimes that are about testing, testing, testing. It asks you to not arrest kids in school. It asks you to limit and sparingly use suspensions and almost never to use expulsions. So that's a little bit about that work.

And for many years after we left that school we were still doing trainings for community members who could support schools or any other institutions in their neighborhoods, through our community-based peace room that we used to have on Clark

Avenue in Rogers Park. So that's a big part of the ongoing work that will need to continue.

We were also conveners of a group of community groups that pressed CPS to finally make suspension and expulsion data public on their website. That was like a five-year battle, which we won a couple of years ago. So now you can actually go to the website and see for yourself, at the individual school level and in aggregate, about suspensions and expulsions. Transparency does help very much to give the community tools and information that they need to advocate for themselves and their kids around these issues.

DS: I really loved the video, “A Wall is Just a Wall,” that you and Tom Callahan made to commemorate activists fighting police violence in 2015. Maybe it’s impossible to just choose one, but is there any moment or action that stands out to you as a highlight from last year in terms of something that you were really proud to be a part of?

MK: I'll cheat and say two. I'm incredibly— I still haven't really processed the fact that we won on the reparations fight. I was one of the co-lead organizers of that campaign. I've been organizing for a very long time, almost 30 years now, and I have lost many more campaigns than I've won. But that one is really special for so many reasons. We stand on the shoulders of decades of work prior to that time and that moment. It was such an intense six months, a very focused campaign. So I spent most of the year, half the year, completely immersed in that struggle, that fight. So all of the actions and different kinds of things we did for that campaign will always stay with me as something very important and I think people have yet to be able to internalize what it's meant. People who've struggled for that, we haven't yet had a chance to process what it means. We just know that the survivors we fought beside and with, just feel so great about what happened and that we fought for them. All these— in this particular case— these old black men now, some of whom were tortured 35, 40 years ago when they were kids and teenagers, and are now senior citizens. To see that celebration party was incredibly poignant and really left me emotional.

That's one, and I think the second that I'd point to is the Sandra Bland actions that we co-organized with The Chicago Light Brigade.

Because Sandra Bland, that case is so personal to me. I'm a black woman, and I drive around a lot, I have to get around to go to court with young people and do all sorts of other things. She is just like me, you know? I felt viscerally, when I saw that video of the way that police officer just completely obliterated her person. It was like, the violence of it felt so visceral and I just saw myself in that car. I've been in that position where the cops have stopped me for some random reason and I'm like, "Why are you stopping me?" And I know my personality, you know? How it'd be like, "Why do I have to not smoke? Why are you stopping me?" The questions and the indignation that she had, felt so real and visceral to me.

So when we had an opportunity here in Chicago— she's from the Chicagoland area— to organize this action memorializing her, lifting her name in lights and saying her name, that was a really emotional action for me. We fought on so many levels for so many things, but personally, for myself, the Sandra Bland action really meant something very profound to me. I still think about her all the time and what must have been going through her mind in that jail cell. Whether or not they killed her with their hands is not the issue. They definitely killed her by putting her in that cell. And I just see myself in that space, like, what is going on here?

So those are the two that stand out.

DS: Thank you for that, and thanks again for talking with me. Do you have anything else you'd like to say before we go?

I think I'll just say one thing that I think is super important currently in this moment that we're in, what I think is a moment of promise and peril because we've got all of these new folks who really haven't been in the streets for all the months and years before the Laquan MacDonald case. I think, I hope, it doesn't get lost in all of this, the incredible leadership of the young black and brown people and their white co-strugglers who have fought really just on principle for all these months before that tape, that helped make the ground for what ended up happening with the release of that tape. I hope that their fight and their organizing and their struggle is not overshadowed. Because it's not just young people of color, but young black people and young queer black people, who have been at the lead and at the forefront.

And now that I see a lot of the old school, traditional, church people and politicians mugging for the cameras, I want people to remember and I want that history to be properly recorded as to who has been in the streets, who has been out in the middle of the night in cold temperatures, post-Ferguson. Even before Ferguson, out here in Chicago people were fighting for Damo at the end of May 2014, as soon as he died. So we've been in the struggle, we've been in the streets. I say we because I give complete and utter credit to these young people. Older folks who've been mentors to some of these young people, and older organizers, without whom a lot of these wins could not have happened, have also been players in that struggle. So this is not solely a generational thing, it's an ideological set of differences between who is included in the fight, who are we fighting for, how do we fight, what are the strategies and tactics that we use, and so what vision of the world do we want to be fighting for?



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