

## **Solidarity in Hostility: The Recognition of Antagonism in Revolutionary Action as Exemplified by the Non-Reformist Prison Abolition Movement**

Meryl Liu

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In these first three paragraphs of her essay on revolutionary action in prison abolition, Meryl Liu provides powerful and efficient **orienting** for her readers. She introduces relevant historical events, gives context for the scholarly discussion, and defines her own **key term** that acts as a framework for the remainder of the piece. By illuminating a “unique and intriguing tension” Meryl captures the reader’s interest and primes them for the thesis of her paper, which follows immediately after the excerpt published here.*

### *Excerpt*

The prison is an “inevitable and permanent feature of our lives”, writes activist and scholar Angela Davis. While we direct mainstream moral condemnation towards the ever-diminishing structures of capital punishment, torture, and warfare, the prison remains omnipresent as an indicator of guaranteed safety and progressive civilization where the bodies of criminal people and children—mostly of color and disenfranchised—are caged, corralled and hidden from view. From origins in chattel slavery, however, the prison remains intertwined with exploitation, racial capitalism, and the oppression of marginalized people to sustain the collective perceived security of the Western settler-colonial state. In turn, the surging population of incarcerated people within the United States in the late 1900s due to the government’s declared ‘wars’ on drugs and crime ignited collective, bloody prison uprisings throughout the West: 1971’s Attica Prison riot being one of the most infamous. Violent state responses that followed would shift the conversation from the reform of an existing system towards the radical and highly controversial movement for *prison abolition*. The call for decarceration, decriminalization, and implementing community alternatives for transformative justice serves as a radical front to the longstanding tradition of systemic racism against Black and non-Black people of color in the United States.

It would be an understatement to state that existing scholarship on prison abolition is merely extensive. In the spheres of Black studies, history, philosophy, and sociology, primarily African American scholars such as Angela Davis, Cedric Robinson, and Allegra McLeod have laid

the foundational groundwork for the core theses of the prison abolition movement's origins, methodologies, semantics, and future directions. The strive for the prison abolition movement to clearly delineate and differentiate itself from prison reform, as well as its origins in the violent unrest and revolt of the incarcerated, however, pose a unique and intriguing tension. There is both a physical and rhetorical 'violence' being projected by abolition activists, where carceral infrastructure is overtaken as seen in the Attica and Walpole prison riots, and the ideologies of the status quo pertaining to justice are radically challenged and deconstructed by scholars for a better future without prisons. There is an abundance of what may be termed as misrecognition of relations, situation, and circumstance between the incarcerated and the state that sustains the prison-industrial complex, which in turn propagates the misrecognition of identity and humanity, perpetuating the injustices of the prison-industrial complex. What does it mean, then, for the oppressed whose material needs, circumstances, and humanity are unrecognized to dismantle, destroy, and enact violence against a parliamentary state and its associated actors of policing, incarceration, and reactionary civilians? In turn, then, what type of recognition does revolutionary action seek to accomplish?

Hence, I wish to define this specific sociological characteristic of non-reformist, revolutionary action as a form of ***solidarity in hostility***: a conventionally negative image of antagonism projected by oppressed groups that do not further what philosopher Patchen Markell precisely identifies as "positive images" when undoing the misrecognition that perpetuates social injustice. These are images of destruction, rioting, violence, disobedience, and nonconforming action. The concept of recognition that establishes relationships between people and between groups in society, defined by Hegelian philosophy and extended upon by philosophers Hannah Arendt and Patchen Markell, is arguably a medium for oppression and injustice to proliferate and deepen. And, indeed, a broader look across studies of non-reformist, revolutionary action in the field of sociology seems to lack this key area of discussion: an analysis of the sociological recognition or rejection of conventional recognition of antagonistic solidarity that revolutionary activism itself asserts. Where exactly do the acts of *revolt* as a form of activism, characterized by the violent uprising, and *non-reformist* reform, characterized by the prison abolition movement that threatens and destabilizes existing and known structures, situate themselves within or expand upon the politics of recognition?

*Author Commentary*

Meryl Liu

In writing this final paper for my first-year Writing Seminar (WRI190 - The Monuments Must Fall), I came to realize that this was not merely a standalone assignment. We were tasked to put forth a researched scholarly argument extending the politics of recognition in a movement or cause of our own choosing, and throughout the semester we had incrementally been building up towards executing this task. From discussing the ‘embodied reactionary’ that Judith Butler failed to acknowledge to arguing that a form of ‘epistemological violence’ is necessary for safe spaces to avoid extending neocolonialism, I knew that I wanted to continue exploring the significance of popular resistance against systems and the state and what it might reveal to us in political and social movements—specifically, in the movement for prison abolition.

Throughout multiple visits to Firestone Library, I delved into primary and secondary sources detailing the history and rhetoric of the abolitionist perspective. I noticed that there were emphasized efforts by multiple scholars to differentiate the movement for prison abolition from prison reform. Consulting with Professor Lewis, my attention was brought to the feature of violence in principled action and the radical nature of calls for prison abolition in historical examples such as the Attica Prison Riots of 1971. I struggled initially with relating this observation to the politics of recognition in our assigned readings for this unit, however, until I began to reframe my thinking. Indeed, the oppressed arise out of a misrecognition of circumstance, not identity, but what is the significance of hostility, antagonism, and violence that they strive to differentiate? The unique features of armed struggle, violent resistance, and violent protest led me to begin to think about a novel form of recognition. How can we create language to discuss the significance of this type of violence? And so, I came to synthesize the recognition of antagonism, and the solidarity formed from hostility.

These were only the beginnings, however, of a long, strenuous process in developing the extent of a scholarly idea. From draft to revision to the final paper, I found again and again that I had to place myself in the perspective of a reader—perhaps a fellow undergraduate peer at Princeton. My introductory paragraphs reflect this consideration, as I deliberated over the most effective way to foreground and preview an argument to a reader such that they have all the necessary tools to be able to take on the flesh of the scholarly conversation that might have been relatively unfamiliar to them minutes prior. What is the historical background of the movement

I care about? What scholarship exists and how do all these sources synthesize to lead me to my conclusions? The ability to create new language and new semantics to understand politics and social relations, while maintaining accessibility in communicating them to a range of audiences, is the backbone of scholarly discourse and what I learned from the first-year writing seminar.

*Editor Commentary*

Owen Travis

Students in the Writing Center will often ask me if they *really* need to do work **orienting** the reader. The argument, typically, is that the paper will only be read by a professor who—let’s face it—is already an expert on the subject. And while I understand their rationale, I say that orienting is less about *what* knowledge exists and more about *where it exists*, in relation to the proposed thesis. The latter, of course, is naturally dependent on the unique **motive** and **thesis** of the paper, as well as the student’s personal interpretation of any outside works. Thus, orienting becomes essential for even the narrowest of audiences.

Not convinced? Suppose I told you everything about a landscape: the location of every tree and rock, every mountain and every spring. If I then dropped you into that scene, it would still take several moments to look around, identify the landmarks that you know so well, and get a sense of bearing. This, I argue, is the purpose of orienting, and Meryl demonstrates it beautifully.

It can be challenging to situate one’s argument within a subject as broad and complex as antagonism in revolutionary action. Meryl does well to clearly define the scope of her paper: she will focus specifically on prison abolition and a type of revolutionary action that is hostile, non-reformist, and demanding of recognition. In the opening paragraph, she provides background information about the origins of prisons in the United States and the events that sparked the movement for abolition. From there, Meryl transitions into a discussion of existing scholarship. She writes: “There is both a physical and rhetorical ‘violence’ being projected by abolition activists.” In order to better explain this violence, Meryl introduces a **key term**: “solidarity in hostility.” By giving a name to the subject of her inquiry, Meryl establishes a framework for the analysis that follows—as good orienting should. At this point, the reader understands how relevant historical events and notable scholarship are positioned in relation to Meryl’s argument. Having gotten their bearings, they are prepared to recognize a new perspective and (hopefully) appreciate a new element of the rhetorical landscape.

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## Bios

**Meryl Liu, '25** is a prospective Physics concentrator from Port Orange, Florida. Beyond STEM, she is deeply passionate about the visual & performing arts, geopolitics, and social justice through a decolonial left perspective. On campus, she can be found performing in the Princeton Pianists Ensemble, writing cell biology exams for Science Olympiad, and designing graphics for HackPrinceton, Society of Women Engineers, and *The Daily Princetonian* as Associate Audience Editor. She wrote this essay as a first-year.

**Owen Travis, '24** is a computer science student who is also pursuing certificates in Spanish and Statistics and Machine Learning. Owen is from Evanston, IL and this is his first year as a Writing Center Fellow. In his free time, he enjoys playing the violin, playing soccer, and constructing crossword puzzles for *The New York Times*. Owen wrote this as a sophomore.