

INTELLECTUALISM AS MAGIC DUST

CONVERSATION BETWEEN DR. JOY JAMES AND PIERCE ELDRIDGE

Sitting to talk with professor, writer, and activist Dr. Joy James is a remarkable gift. We're discussing what thoughts and theories emerge within the folds of novels on the bookshelf behind me, and within her most recent release *In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love: Precarity, Power, Communities*. Leaning into conversations about academia co-opting revolutionary activisms and fidgeting with what it means to be an intellectual, we peer through the lens of "academic abolitionism" and the current state of the prison abolition movement, to explore how we can create revolutionary organisation and activisms by burrowing down into compost and soil.

Pierce: Joy James.

Dr. Joy James: Pierce, it's interesting how you don't identify as an "intellectual." I see that term as magic dusting that I sprinkle on everyone who cares and who thinks. Maybe we need to think about how we define that term. I do differentiate between academic intellectuals and intellectuals who are artists, who are based in communities, who are based in rebellion. I'm an academic intellectual because they pay me to do that work. As an intellectual in another zone of activism, it's always free labour on my end, not for a monetary benefit.

In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love—Divided created the acronym "IPORL"—is a collective endeavour that keeps me from becoming a zombie in the academy. IPORL is alive with the essence of what we have to preserve and amplify in a collective text.

In the critique of the 'academy', you're describing how there is a distinct difference between academic abolition and how institutions dominate and extract from the lineages of radical, street, incarcerated intellectuals. Academic abolitionist texts often lack the writings of grassroots, street, prison movements. Could you connect how revolutionary love comes into relation with this, what does it restrict and reveal?

I'll invert it for you and begin with revolutionary love.

We love to begin with love.

About two months ago we started a podcast on Black Power Media; it's titled *Guerrilla Intellectual University (GIU)*. Felicia Denaud—a Haitian scholar who studies imperial warfare and liberation movements—joined us to speak about her work and her contribution to *IPORL*.

Felicia is one of the people that helps me think out loud. Students were and are struggling not just at elite sites like the Ivies, but across the country; they're struggling to have the right to articulate their own analyses without being indoctrinated into certain forms of abolition or political struggle.

I was introduced to abolition by Angela Davis. I had met Davis outside the Academy because I was organising in New York City when I was a grad student. I worked with Black internationalists, Marxists, and white women in the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), which Davis joined in 1968 and left in 1991, through *Women for Racial and Economic Equality (WREE)* during the Cold War. WREE was the US affiliate to the *Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)* which was formed after World War II as an anti-fascist women's organisation; it was based in Eastern Europe. WREE was based in the "First World"; WIDF in the Soviet Union, or "Second World." Women from leftist former formal colonies in the "Third World" were also affiliates of the WIDF. I was trained by older women in: WREE; an all-women/lesbian dojo in Brooklyn (the sensei was taught by a Harlem Black Panther) and internationalist Black women radicals.

I first met Davis at a 1983 WREE conference in Manhattan. Later I would meet her at the UN Decade on Women Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, and was assigned by WREE to assist Davis with circulating a petition against nuclear war and childhood hunger. My introduction to Davis was not through the Academy, it was through leftist/communist international organising. Years after the Cold War ended, I was awarded a postdoc fellowship and spent a year with Davis at UC Santa Cruz where she was a professor.

Several years later, while I was editing the *Angela Y. Davis Reader* (1998) Davis asked me to do the prototype conference for Critical Resistance at CU Boulder where I was teaching. The conference *Unfinished Liberation* was named after one of Davis's 1969 UCLA lectures. The conference was massive, exhausting, and

expensive (it's discussed in *IPORL's* "Seven Lessons in One Abolition Notebook"). I was untenured; my undergraduate students were organising with me. I started thinking about exploitation of labour, even for good causes; and how much these conferences cost, that particular conference was reportedly the most expensive conference that CU Boulder had held at that time because of honoraria, travel, accommodations at four or five-star hotels. It became an elite event. Boulder is designed for the upper middle classes although here are some students of colour or first-generation students on scholarship.

The students who worked with me on the conference were white and affluent or Black students who were the first generation to go to college or university. Both groups were politicised in different ways. The white affluent students did a lot of volunteer unpaid labour. I paid the (Black) working class students through workstudy. One day the white affluent students told me they couldn't come to class or hand their papers in on time. My response: "*Why?*" Their response: "*We have to go to Denver to meet with the FBI.*" My "*Why?*" became a very serious, "*Wait, tell me why.*" They informed me that the FBI wanted information on their friends in *E.L.F* (*Earth Liberation Front*) and their answer would be: "*We don't have any info.*" The FBI was pursuing youths/students in 1997-98 as environmental "terrorists", attempting to bury young activists in prisons for decades. [Similar to "Cop City" in Atlanta, GA.] The FBI also pursued, imprisoned or killed Black Panthers as "terrorists" in the 1960s and 1970s. The FBI has a long history of repression.

When I invited local people organising on the ground—those who had contact with political prisoners, including those in Colorado's "supermax" prison—to the conference, I was told by the Asian-American chair of my Ethnic Studies department that I could buy them pizza and sodas and meet with them but they would not have real input in planning this academic conference on abolition.

Rather than resist her instructions, to my shame, I focused on the fact that I was not tenured. I would not be rehired after a negative review. I decided to follow orders. I'm sure there was wrath along with disappointment from the *real organisers* who could not easily navigate academic institutions where I'm sheltered. Academics can take the stories of the incarcerated and political prisoners and re-interpret or alter their meanings. What are the incarcerated or on-the-ground organisers going to do

about it? Complain? To whom? There's a power imbalance in the academic-abolition-incarcerated relationship.

In order to make an intervention against this power imbalance, I invited four Harlem Panthers to the Boulder conference. They were at the time the only panthers present. I had been given an invitee list from the academic-led planning committee of the California-based Critical Resistance; they provided no Panther names, based on my recollection.

When I think of Panthers, I think of the breakfast program, you're up at five or six in the morning, feeding hungry children and families of all races. I think of self-defence, and community training. I think of the central committee. I think of activists being targeted by COINTELPRO and going underground but sending communiques to Black communities to resist police violence. Black Panthers were targeted for elimination. Panthers, Black Liberation Army members, American Indian Movement (AIM) radicals were losing their lives. People were imprisoned for decades; others were murdered by the FBI and local police forces. People who debate Afro-Pessimism (AP) might not value AP, but AP emphasises that a *Black* target has a specific vulnerability to violence and dishonour.

Inviting the Panthers to *Unfinished Liberation* triggered my critical thinking. Lee Lew Lee, who did the documentary *All Power to the People: The Black Panther Party and Beyond!* (1996), was one of the Panthers invited. Kim Holder, Safiyah Bukhari, Gabe Torres were the others.

This semester I am teaching a class on "Black Panther intellectualism" where students interview Panther veterans who obtained doctorates and taught in the academy.

Let's think about intellectualism with magic dust.

Lee Lew-Lee, Afro-Chinese, was in a militant Asian formation [I Wor Kuen] and in the Black Panthers. *IPORL* describes the late-night phone call to suppress Lee's screening. I wouldn't defy my chair, but I did defy Davis when she told me that former Oakland Panther Elaine Brown wanted *All Power to the People!* documentary banned from the conference because unflattering things were said

about her in the documentary, one Panther referenced the older, white man who introduced Brown to Black radicalism as being a CIA agent; Brown herself had published that content in her memoir *A Taste of Power*. Because Lee Lew Lee, was an artist, a Panther vet, I said "No" in an impolite way to the request to oust his film/him from the conference. There are costs that come with defying the powerful.

After the conference, when I asked about attending the UC Berkeley Critical Resistance launch in September and how to obtain airfare and housing, I was told that I could submit a proposal for a workshop, it would be vetted and then I would be informed if I should attend the conference with funding. If I recall correctly, Boulder spent about \$100,000 in 1997 for *Unfinished Liberation* (in 2023 about \$187,000) which included financing all out of state visitors, including those from California. I never submitted an application to attend the formal launch in Berkeley.

After the conference I edited the anthology *States of Confinement*, largely written by academics and nonprofit leaders. The Panthers who attended did not submit chapters. I mailed copies of *States of Confinement* into prisons. One Panther vet who was also in the Black Liberation Army noted that the anthology did not reflect the struggles waged by the Panthers and militants. Later, I left Boulder to teach at Columbia and then Brown University. At Brown, I spent several years anthologizing political prisoners: *Imprisoned Intellectuals*; *The New Abolitionists*; *Warfare in the American Homeland*. I got a lot of grief for highlighting revolutionaries twenty years ago.

IPORL interviews discuss how what was taboo twenty some years ago is now iconic in terms of highlighting Black resistance and political prisoners. That's how the marketplace rolls. Once state/capital/academia no longer think the rebels are a threat, they then become symbolic and part of visual culture and iconography. They become brands to write about. I think progressive society has an emotional need for icons as comfort or distraction in order to feel "safe."

In her memoir, Assata Shakur details being shot and captured by NJ troopers who kill her companion Zayd Shakur. The white NJ trooper shot and killed was not shot by Assata; he might have been shot by "friendly fire" [similar to Atlanta trooper/police wounded but not by Tortuguita the forest protector in Atlanta who was

shot by Atlanta troopers/police fourteen times in his face and head while sitting down with his hands raised in the air). Shakur's other comrade Sundiata Acoli is caught and imprisoned for decades. Shakur becomes pregnant while in her last trial with her Panther co-defendant. She is convicted. The prison tries to abort her child. She is able to give birth and then is determined to break out of prison to see her child outside a cage. Several people help liberate her, including white revolutionaries. No one is injured during the escape. The US imprisons Italian citizen Silvia Baraldini for twenty years of abuse in US prisons for assisting Black revolutionaries. Extradited back to Italy, she serves a few more years before parole.

People paid dearly for their resistance. What we put in between two covers in a book to sell to the public, or to get tenure and promotion, often might not capture the truer stories of rebellions against empire, genocide, enslavement. The academics are *not* the experts of a war that we never fought. (Frank Wilderson might be the only US academic who fought in a guerrilla war, with the radical wing of the ANC against apartheid in South Africa). There's a legacy trail problematised in academic abolition. Be wary of the lack of context, and political interventions that shift towards institutional power.

Other theorists who are working in this intervention are also trying to figure out how to combat the institutional refusal to be witnessed in their writing. Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Wahneema Lubiano, Kevin Quashie, Eric Stanley pose a very interesting question of the problem of recognition. I think of anti-trans optics and what they collectively bring up for me. Your text directs me to ask: how can we be seen without being known and how can we be known without being hunted?

That is a very interesting query. It's quite pointed. To be known without being hunted. In *IPORL*, I talk about the hunter a lot. It's interesting that we share that language. You are right, the hunters are not just the police. In civil society, hunters are deputised. Some people raise their hands, happy to hunt others for free, and to obtain whatever psychic pleasure that comes with this violence. I want to pose that question back to you: "How is it that we can be known to ourselves when we're always in some form of fugitivity?"

I think about this regularly within the constructs that I'm surrounded by as a queer body, also going through my own journey of figuring out and experimenting with my transness, and the ideas of the state having a play and a conscious thumb—so to speak—on my body and on my existence. To move through space publicly, I have to be in constant negotiation within my internal dialogue; on the stakes I have to play, how I have to negotiate, how I put everything on to address myself in the outside world. I'm in constant negotiation of if I will be safe or if I will be protected; if the service of the police is actually for me or against me. When I have had to access those services, the police have not been for me, not for queer trans bodies, not for Black bodies, not for any divergent, marginalised or disenfranchised body other than what replicates and looks like the state. A part of the monarchy in the UK functions as this incredibly oppressive force if you aren't of a certain higher class or binary identity. In consideration to that, I start to think about a quote from your book that reads, *abolitionism is a revolutionary struggle*, and I suppose that's what we're speaking about. Existing in the fugitivity with that struggle constantly, and oscillating between forms of safety and surveillance. My question then is, what becomes possible when you are immersed in the revolutionary struggle that dominant and algorithmic systems cannot chart or reward, or even begin to understand, especially when the politics surrounding us—the police, the violence as we know them—prioritise recognition by and access to a dominant paradigm?

It begins within *In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love*. It's elusive. I'm not sure we can answer our own questions. There are glimpses. This is not a stable world or a stable society, given environmental devastations, earthquakes, trafficking people, the disappearance of babies from Cameroon. We have a long list: poisoned water; militarism; the rapes and violations of women and girls, men and boys – which are underreported due to the UN's failure to be functional for communities.

We have communities and loved ones. Without that, this becomes a zone of desperation and despair. To move through zones while being hunted might mean to move through different levels of our own psyches. I think that we're mutating. At first, I was complaining about that because I want to sit in a rocking chair or by the ocean just watching the waves.

You mention fracturing as well.

Yes. I mean fracturing time, everything. What I know of myself belonging to a people who have been hunted, enslaved, raped and genocided is that we have not been able or allowed as a mass to fully maintain dignity, family or some version of love, to feed hungry people or give blankets to the unhoused, without dealing with cops and social workers. We scrape together in a nation that has no universal health care or basic standards of living and decency. Under these conditions, we constantly change. If we are not attentive to material reality, then we slowly die in different ways. Our intellectual capacity, our emotional capacities become truncated. They start to shrink like an unused muscle. Your heart is a muscle or muscular organ. If you don't exercise it, it atrophies.

At first, I wasn't sure about the *Worms* thing you have going on here. Then I thought it was eerie, but necessary for oxygen to enter the soil. This is why things can grow. We can burrow down. We can disturb how compacted the soil has become from fascist birds stomping on it all the time. We can undo some harm but we cannot undo all harm until we have sufficient control over the birds of prey.

What do you do when you have a population of prisoners who say they are slaves? They have the right to fugitivity, which is treated as rebellion [<https://inquest.org/slave-rebel-or-citizen/>]. How would academic abolitionists or white-collar abolitionists dialogue with “slaves”? How would they support their claims to fugitivity (which is illegal because it violates the Thirteenth Amendment which legalises slavery in prisons). Can we rebuild the sanctuary movement from the 1980s when Salvadorans were fleeing into the U.S. from contras and death squads funded with our tax dollars as President Reagan destabilised communal or socialist formations in Latin America, and beyond. Under the Obama Administration, our/my tax dollars paid for terrorism through AFRICOM drone strikes.

Then, how do we build that capacity into the academic world and reimagine those worlds? How do we protect and honour those existences that we're bringing in and out, and swaying between, or unfurling from the compost with worms?

What you just said makes me think of Thich Nhat Hanh's assertion: *When the world gives you garbage, turn it into compost and grow roses.* One person cannot answer

that query. We need a collective response. It's not enough to stay in your private library and write and theorise. My ideas come from the degree that I'm anywhere near people who organise in resistance. War resisters are intellectuals. They inspire me. I'm not trying to romanticise the "proletariat" or "lumpenproletariat." I learned in classrooms—and in the streets—that protests unauthorised by the state, police or bureaucracy can be transformative and shape epistemology.

In *Resisting State Violence*, I write about an anti-police violence march across the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan that was blocked by the NYPD. It was a mass struggle led by Black activists at night on the bridge. The NYPD on the Manhattan side were violently preventing peaceful protesters from crossing over the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan, I wanted to retreat to the rear. It was dark. I couldn't see the netting, and I was not a good swimmer (irrational thoughts, because the fall would have likely finished off anyone who went over the side of the bridge). A Black man yelled for women and children to go to the back to offer more safety (it was seen as a patriarchal call but it was protective). The Black woman in front of me, and among seasoned organisers, said "No" and told us as women to stay put and resist cop violence. I was afraid. But I was not going to walk away. I cannot allow myself to leave unless we as a people go collectively. Militant Black women told me to hold my ground against the NYPD. Their strategy reminded me of what BPP/Republic of New Afrika political prisoner Safiyah Bukhari stated at the Brown Univ. conference on Imprisoned Intellectuals: *We were/are caught between a rock and a hard place.*

Back to the bridge that night decades ago (it is discussed in *Resisting State Violence*). Hostile police forces were in front of us. Behind us, Black teens were menacing us with golf clubs. I grew up in a military family with an officer (likely an intelligence officer ... which is disturbing). Military officers golf, a lot, as do police. I recognised the economic value of the clubs, they were of quality. My next thought was, 'Wait! "inner city" Black youth can't afford those clubs', and there are no golf courses in their neighbourhoods.' There are multiple golf courses in suburban New York, e.g., Staten Island which was predominantly white middle class and home to sizable numbers of NYPD and police advocates. I surmised that cops gave clubs to unprincipled Black teens (or teens compromised by police threatening them with arrests for priors) to harass Black protestors fighting police violence. We were caught between white cops in front of us on the Manhattan side of the bridge,

blocking our march, and Black teens harassing protestors on the Brooklyn side. I loved the leadership of militant, working-class Black women who could handle the cops and the streets. (Some scoffed at me for being embedded in white academia and white-led communist feminist formations ... perhaps this is one reason I did not join the CPUSA when asked to do so.) Black women leaders negotiated with the Black teen disruptors. They worked as Captive Maternals [<https://scalawagmagazine.org/2023/04/captive-maternal-joy-james/>]. The movement phase is a crisis stage due to violence. Their capacity to make connections to community people who are threatening movements involved political candour while care. Black men focused on the police violence from those external to the community; Black women rather than scream at the teens talked with them quietly. I couldn't hear everything. But the content was “Look, you know we're protesting and fighting police killing you. Who gave you those golf clubs? You're not going to use them tonight. Not against us.” Those most likely to be victims of police predatory violence, Black male teens, realised our function as Captive Maternals (non-gender entity) and stood down.

Everyone exited the Brooklyn Bridge that night, largely unharmed. We never made it through to Manhattan but all car traffic to and from Brooklyn had been stopped. NYC's mundane routines had been disrupted by people who reminded all of us that we can and must resist police killings and violence.

Years later, I would work with mothers who lost children from police murders, in Chicago, Brazil or Colombia. I listen and I watch, so that I can learn from the community. On Feb 8, 2023, at my college, we hosted a roundtable on “Family, Freedom & Security,” with Joyce McMillan, Samaria Rice Amanda Wallace, Dawn Wooten [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ts3TLQ-TrCI>].

On *Guerrilla Intellectual University*, we spoke with Felicia Denaud [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJtUWlo39dI>] who spoke about “devotion.” I often talk about love as political will (Agape). We have to become devoted to more than our careers. Often, our definition of how to be helpful is defined by elites, and our discourse is compatible with liberal politics and careerism. To show devotion to masses might create a glitch in transactional careerism.

The state university is literally the government. Private and elite colleges/universities are multi-million/billion corporations. The most prominent academics who define "abolition" do not work at working-class institutions even if they have working-class students in privileged sectors. For elite formations, the teaching load is four classes a year or less; it is double that in working class schools. Elites have ample time to write, publish, conference, obtain honoraria or speaking fees and grants or awards in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In nonprofit zones, Black Lives Matter networks received hundreds of millions of dollars, if not billions, from corporate sectors that are largely anti-union. Most people who organise in neighbourhoods and city streets are anonymous. Celebrity leadership is linked to foundations that are liberal and pro-state, so pro-police. Under capitalism, elites dominate or capture progressive territory. They did not risk their lives or careers to fight in freedom movements but they rebranded them in order to assimilate radicalism into liberalism.

Indigenous peoples and Blacks labour under dishonour, labour exploitation, and police violence. Anti-revolutionary intellectuals leverage revolutionaries as symbolic markers or visual culture. All of the Panthers did not and do not have the same politics. Focus on those still imprisoned: Mumia Abu-Jamal, Ruchell Magee, Kamal Siddiqi, Jalil Al-Amin, Leonard Peltier (from the American Indian Movement), elders with medical issues. Resisting purchase from corporations/nonprofits/academia, we find devotion and war resistance.

Devotion, that's really beautiful and might serve as a nice place to land. Talking about learning from the streets and in the academy addresses this pluralism of abolitionism in *IPORL*. Before we end, I want to know what's percolating around you. What are you reading at the moment? We're a literary magazine, so knowing these things is always wonderful to share. I'd love to hear what's in your compost.

Safiya Bukhari's *The War Before*. Re-reading Wittgenstein. I am diving into CIA atrocities and assassinations noted in *White Malice*. I'm trying to better understand the empire's violent functions and how the empire anticipates and co-opts resistance movements when they are not outright killing them. We don't survive if

we lack defence strategies from the police apparatus. I want to absorb everything: poetry, plays, history, music, spoken word.

We were just talking before about how everything interjects and is woven.

We must enjoy our lives, but we also must face the wars—in their plurality—and decide if and how to fight. The best expression is that through devotion we enter the battle. Maybe I'm inching towards it. Maybe, I have been in it for decades and I never knew it. I would like to lead a devoted life. That would be meaningful to me. So, I will read everything, of course, including *Worms Magazine*.