Abolition Democracy: Theory and Praxis

Lesson Plan: Session 9

Session 9: Abolishing the Family Policing System

"They separate children at the border of Harlem too," reads a poster by Abolish NYC ACS (Administration of Children's Services). This session will focus on how the family policing system, operating under the guise of "child welfare," functions as an arm of the punitive state.

Readings:

Roberts, Dorothy. *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World.* New York: Basic Books, 2022 (excerpts).
Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body*. New York: Pantheon, 1997 (excerpts).
Roberts, Dorothy. "Abolishing Policing Also Means Abolishing Family Regulation." *The Imprint*. June 16, 2020.

Multimedia:

Center for Contemporary Critical Thought. Abolition Democracy 10/13 | Abolishing Family Policing. February 15, 2021. https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/abolition1313/10-13-abolish-family-policing/.

Reading Notes

- All of the readings in this session are by Professor Dorothy Roberts, the leading scholar on family policing and its abolition. These texts link what is commonly and euphemistically called "child protective services" with the systems of prisons and police and a longer history of controlling Black bodies that thread back to chattel slavery and the slave trade.
- *Killing the Black Body* focuses more on the ways in which Black bodies, especially the bodies of Black women, have been policed and controlled since the antebellum era, how rape was used as a form of labor production, how separating Black children from their parents were used during the chattel slavery era through Reconstruction, and how these pattens continue today through the child welfare system. It also addresses how contraceptives were marketed to Black women and girls in ways that actually removed their bodily autonomy into contemporary times.
- *Torn Apart*, which builds upon even earlier work by Roberts in *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (2002), takes an abolitionist stance against the family policing system. Family policing is used to oppress Black families, Roberts argues in this book, and not only fails to keep children safe, but rather provides a mode through which Black families can be punished and separated. This process results in continued over-incarceration of Black parents and eventually, also their children.

Questions

- The idea of "caring for children" is often used to justify the separation of children from their parents through the family policing system. Can you think of other examples where certain punitive actions are taken in the name of protecting or caring for a different group?
- In what ways do you think the family policing system is at the same time a method to distribute wealth?
- Abolition of family policing requires actual structures that will keep children safe and families supported. What are suggestions you have for how to do that?