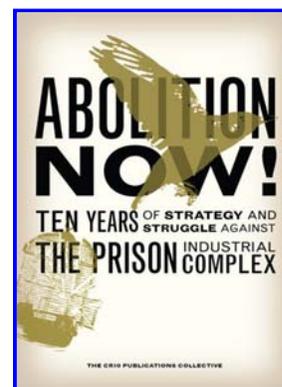


## “Warfare and the Terms of Engagement,” Dylan Rodríguez. Book Excerpt from Abolition Now!

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Revolution by the Book will periodically post excerpts from new (and older) AK Press books. This one comes from the book we recently co-published with Critical Resistance: [Abolition Now: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex](#). It’s a quick glimpse of a powerful piece written by [Dylan Rodríguez](#) that frames the prison industrial complex as a form of domestic warfare. Dylan is an associate professor in the Ethnic Studies department at UC Riverside. For more on the crucial work that Critical Resistance does, check out their [website](#).



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We are collectively witnessing, surviving, and working in a time of unprecedented state-organized human capture and state-produced physical/social/psychic alienation, from the 2.5 million imprisoned by the domestic and global US prison industrial complex to the profound forms of informal apartheid and proto-apartheid that are being instantiated in cities, suburbs, and rural areas all over the country. This condition presents a profound crisis—and political possibility—for people struggling against the white supremacist state, which continues to institutionalize the social liquidation and physical evisceration of Black, brown, and aboriginal peoples nearby and far away. If we are to approach racism, neoliberalism, militarism/militarization, and US state hegemony and domination in a legitimately “global” way, it is nothing short of unconscionable to expend significant political energy protesting American wars elsewhere (e.g. Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) when there are overlapping, and *no less profoundly oppressive*, declarations of and mobilizations for war in our very own, most intimate and nearby geographies of “home.”

This time of crisis and emergency necessitates a critical examination of the political and institutional logics that structure so much of the US progressive left, and particularly the “establishment” left that is tethered (for better and worse) to the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). I have defined the NPIC elsewhere as the set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class social control with surveillance over public political discourse, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements. This definition is most focused on the industrialized incorporation, accelerated since the 1970s, of pro-state liberal and progressive campaigns and movements into a spectrum of government-proctored non-profit organizations.

It is in the context of the formation of the NPIC as a political power structure that I wish to address, with a less-than-subtle sense of alarm, a peculiar and disturbing *politics of assumption* that often structures, disciplines, and actively shapes the work of even the most progressive movements and organizations within the US establishment left (of which I too am a part, for better and worse): that is, the left’s willingness to fundamentally tolerate—and *accompanying unwillingness to abolish*—the institutionalized dehumanization of the contemporary policing and imprisonment apparatus in its most localized, unremarkable, and hence “normal” manifestations within the domestic “homeland” of the Homeland Security state.

Behind the din of progressive and liberal reformist struggles over public policy, civil liberties, and law, and beneath the infrequent mobilizations of activity to defend against the next onslaught of racist, classist, ageist, and misogynist criminalization, there is an unspoken politics of assumption that *takes for granted* the mystified permanence of domestic warfare as a constant production of targeted and massive suffering, guided by the logic of Black, brown, and indigenous subjection to the expedencies and essential violence of the American (global) nation-building project. To put it differently: despite the unprecedented forms of imprisonment, social and political repression, and violent policing that compose the mosaic of our historical

time, the establishment left (within and perhaps beyond the US) does not care to envision, much less politically prioritize, the *abolition of US domestic warfare* and its structuring white supremacist social logic as its most urgent task of the present and future. Our non-profit left, in particular, seems content to engage in desperate (and usually well-intentioned) attempts to *manage the casualties* of domestic warfare, foregoing the urgency of an abolitionist praxis that openly, critically, and radically addresses the moral, cultural, and political premises of these wars.

Not long from now, generations will emerge from the organic accumulation of rage, suffering, social alienation, and (we hope) politically principled rebellion against this living apocalypse and pose to us some rudimentary questions of radical accountability: How were we able to accommodate, and even culturally and politically *normalize* the strategic, explicit, and openly racist technologies of state violence that effectively socially neutralized and frequently liquidated entire *nearby* populations of our people, given that ours are the very same populations that have historically struggled to survive and overthrow such “classical” structures of dominance as colonialism, frontier conquest, racial slavery, and other genocides? In a somewhat more intimate sense, *how could we live with ourselves* in this domestic state of emergency, and why did we seem to generally forfeit the creative possibilities of radically challenging, dislodging, and transforming the *ideological and institutional premises* of this condition of domestic warfare in favor of short-term, “winnable” policy reforms? (For example, why did we choose to formulate and tolerate a “progressive” political language that *reinforced* dominant racist notions of “criminality” in the process of trying to discredit the legal basis of “Three Strikes” laws?) What were the fundamental concerns of our progressive organizations and movements during this time, and were they willing to comprehend and galvanize an effective, or even viable opposition to the white supremacist state’s *terms of engagement* (that is, *warfare*)? This radical accountability reflects a variation on anticolonial liberation theorist Frantz Fanon’s memorable statement to his own peers, comrades, and nemeses:

Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity. In the underdeveloped countries preceding generations have simultaneously resisted the insidious agenda of colonialism and paved the way for the emergence of the current struggles. Now that we are in the heat of combat, we must shed the habit of decrying the efforts of our forefathers or feigning incomprehension at their silence or passiveness.

Lest we fall victim to a certain political nostalgia that is often induced by such illuminating Fanonist exhortations, we ought to clarify the premises of the social “mission” that our generation of US based progressive organizing has undertaken.

In the vicinity of the constantly retrenching social welfare apparatuses of the US state, much of the most urgent and immediate work of community-based organizing has revolved around service provision. Importantly, this pragmatic focus also builds a certain progressive ethic of voluntarism that constructs the model activist as a variation on older liberal notions of the “good citizen.” Following Fanon, the question is whether and how this mission ought to be fulfilled or betrayed. I believe that to respond to this political problem requires an analysis and conceptualization of “the state” that is far more complex and laborious than we usually allow in our ordinary rush of obligations to build campaigns, organize communities, and write grant proposals. In fact, I think one pragmatic step toward an abolitionist politics involves the development of grassroots pedagogies (such as reading groups, in-home workshops, inter-organization and inter-movement critical dialogues) that will compel us to teach ourselves about the different ways that the state works in the context of domestic warfare, so that we no longer treat it simplistically. We require, in other words, a *scholarly* activist framework to understand that the state can and must be radically confronted on multiple fronts by *an abolitionist politics*.