

Abolition Democracy

Despite the fact that we are legally bound by national and international law not to torture, what the mainstream media seems focused upon debating is whether and when to use torture, as if both national and international law could be suspended if the authorities deem it necessary. How does allowing the public discussion about torture to go on like this entail an attack on the moral integrity of citizens and democracy? Does democracy have anything to do with morality?

The public discussion of torture has been limited by the widespread conviction that democracy is quintessentially American and that any strategy designed to protect or defend the American version of democracy is legitimate. A further problem with this discussion is that the American version of democracy has become increasingly synonymous with capitalism, and capitalism has become progressively more defined by its ability to roam the globe. This is what has framed the conversation about torture and has allowed moral dilemmas about torture to be expressed alongside the notion that permissible forms of violence are necessary if American democracy is to be preserved, both in the U.S. and abroad. In the final anal-

ysis, these moral positions against torture do not have the power to challenge American exceptionalism. This unquestioned rift between moral opposition to particular tactics and what is considered to be an imperative to save the nation has enabled a torrent of obfuscating discourse on terrorism on the one hand, and the practice of torture on the other.

Of course, it is important to vigorously object to torture as a technique of control that militates against the ideals and promise of U.S. democracy. But when U.S. democracy becomes the barometer by which any and all political conduct is judged, it is not difficult to transform specific acts of torture into conduct that is tolerable, conduct that does not necessarily violate the community's moral integrity.

There are myriad examples of the inability of morality to transform the sphere of politics. When torture is inflicted on human beings that are marked as racially and culturally inferior—as people from Iraq are—it is not difficult to shift conversations about torture to a more general register, thus ignoring the damage it does to particular individuals.

I am very suspicious of the discourse that implies that torture is more damaging to its perpetrators than to its victims. Yes, it is certainly true that the revelations regarding the brutal techniques of interrogation at Guantánamo and the acts of physical violence and sexual coercion at Abu Ghraib raise significant questions about this society, its government, its military, and its incarceration practices. But when this eclipses the profound suffering of the men and women who

have been tortured, it reveals the extent to which the reverberations of morality can support the very racism that enabled the torture in the first place. Thus, it is important not to take for granted that resistance to U.S. torture always implies solidarity with the victims. At the same time that we question the government and military for its role in the perpetration of torture, we must also question our ability to imagine the victims as human beings—individuals—equal in every important respect to those of us who happen to live in the global north.

How, then, can the issue of torture be formulated so as not to authorize a justificatory practice that fails to consider the impact of torture on particular human beings, their bodies and minds? Human rights play a decisive role here—and it is significant that after decades of fraudulently claiming the most progressive human rights record in the world, the United States is now on the defensive. The lawsuits brought by the Center for Constitution Rights on behalf of detainees inside and outside the U.S. are one example of the resistance to the Bush Administration's policies and practices. I have already alluded to the importance of bringing an analysis of racism into the frame. This was clearly lacking in the debates sparked by the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs. How does the meaning of torture shift in accordance with its targets?

Ariel Dorfman once wrote that one of the problems with the discourse of torture in the public sphere is that it puts citizens in the

position of having to sever themselves from the pain of others. This is why I call it a crime against moral imagination. We are being asked as citizens to sever ourselves from the suffering of others, thus in a way killing the moral and emotive dimensions of our citizenship.

In a previous conversation we discussed the framework within which the images of torture at Abu Ghraib were popularly interpreted—the interpretive scheme offered to the public that helped to produce a certain understanding of the photographs. I was saying that this interpretive framework, in summoning responses of incredulity, then a sense of national trauma—trauma done to the nation—foreclosed solidarity with the victims. It revealed, if you will, the limits of our collective moral imagination. The human beings represented in the photographs became the abstract objects of forms of torture that were considered anathema to democracy. Nude bodies piled in a pyramid; bodies compelled to simulate sexual acts; hooded heads—who are all of these people? Can we imagine them as workers, artists, educators, parents, children? Can we imagine ourselves in their places? I don't think we were encouraged to think about the images in this way. In a sense, the public responses to the Abu Ghraib photographs tended to recapitulate the assumptions of U.S. hegemony that transformed the people of Iraq—and, of course, Saddam Hussein as the quintessential inhabitant of that country—into materializations of an ideological enemy.

I also made the point earlier that a similar dilemma can be discovered in the way historical responses to lynching—even those that vigorously opposed lynching—often tended to erase the humanity of the black victims of lynching. Thus, opponents of lynching sometimes ended up unknowingly doing the work of their adversaries.

So the dominant interpretive frame within which public conversations about torture take place in the U.S. only go so far as to reaffirm, defend, and reinforce pre-existing assumptions about the nature of American democracy—official assumptions. As a result, the very human suffering shown in the photos remains outside the discussable frame, and is thus cancelled out by going unacknowledged.

Particularly considering the extent to which American exceptionalism informs the ways in which we are urged to think about the “war on terror.” This particular approach to torture affirms American exceptionalism, the superiority of U.S. democracy.

I'd like to shift gears now and begin by asking you about the usefulness of the term “Empire.” Having read a lot of your work, I don't remember you using it very widely.

It is a useful term. I tend to use the term *imperialism* more than the term *empire*. As I think about the reasons I might do that,

it occurs to me that I probably want to retain a very specific connection to capitalism, which is not necessarily implied in the more global term empire. It is not because I don't believe it's a useful term, but rather because I want to highlight the way the current military aggression in Iraq and the Bush administration's policies of global war resonates with history, and, in particular, with the war against Vietnam. I also want to keep in mind the attendant movement of capital historically and today. The discourse on globalization sometimes conveys the impression that capital has only recently become global, and that these global migrations are a byproduct of what is called the information age. It is important to remember that capital has a long and brutal history of moving across national borders—imperialism, as Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg observed so long ago, is not a minor consort of capitalism, but rather a fundamental feature of its development. Today we refer to this era as one that is defined by the power of such international financial organizations as the IMF and the World Bank and the ability of capital not only to move across national borders, but to restructure far-flung economies, wreaking havoc on social relations everywhere. This new imperialism means that capital has entered the most intimate spaces, not only transforming people's economic activity (young girls in the Global South now produce the world's clothes and shoes)—but it has transformed their dreams of the future. This is probably why I tend to use the term imperialism.

Also, although I've been talking about the turn of the twenty-first century, it may be important to link the developments of this era with the turn of the twentieth century, the rise of monopoly capital, and U.S. imperialist adventures in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, the Philippines. It is also important to link the role that this military aggression has played in the construction of a racial state domestically: the consolidation of Jim Crow, the industrialization of the South, the move of industrial capitalists into the Southern states in the U.S. In my own conceptual framework, I try to keep all of these historical moments in the conversation and therefore use the more processual term, imperialism.

The historian William Appleman Williams, in his very important little book, Empire as a Way of Life, spoke of an American "imperial history, imperial psychology, and imperial ethic."¹⁷ One could argue that Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib are exemplars of this imperial ethic and psychology. A psychology of utter contempt, disregard, dehumanization, and boundless hubris, on the one hand, and on the other, an ethics of impunity, asymmetry, and lawlessness. Are these not aspects of Empire as a way of life?

Yes, absolutely. But I still insist on the acknowledgement of the fact that the putative aim of this imperial project is to guarantee the rule of democracy. And this should be perceived as a glaring contradiction: the pursuit of global dominance by military means rationalized by the defense and

spread of American democracy—or should we say capitalism? I find this underlying commodification even more menacing than the hubris, which is obviously displayed by the Bush administration and which many of us accept unquestioningly. The notion of democracy has been fashioned into something like a commodity that can be exported, sold to, or imposed upon entire populations.

The imperial dimension of this project is even more obvious when one considers the extent to which rights and liberties normally associated with democracy are cavalierly subordinated to asserting superiority and control over the peoples of the entire world. Consider how elections in Iraq are staged for the consumption of those in the United States. The right to vote, of course, is represented as the quintessential moment of democracy. Therefore we were asked to momentarily suspend our memory of what paved the way for these elections—the bombing, invasion and occupation that continues to cause deaths, maiming, destruction, the dismantling of institutions, and the desecration of one of the world's oldest cultures. U.S. imperialism becomes even more menacing as it increasingly constrains our capacity to imagine what an authentic democracy might be. As the imposition of democracy is offered as primary aim of this military aggression, “democracy” loses whatever substantive meaning it might have and is confined to the formality of exercising the right to vote. This limited notion of democracy—both for the Iraq and the U.S.—forecloses notions of

democracy that insist on economic, racial, gender, and sexual justice and equality.

Is it not empire also in that, like Bush the first, Bush the second has never—and could never—imagine apologizing? I mean, is not this kind of arrogance and insouciance, blatant and brutal imperial hubris?

It is. It occurs to me that there have been presidents more inclined to humility.

Like Clinton who went to Latin America to apologize for the Contras.

Or, even to take a domestic example, when Clinton apologized for the Tuskegee Experiment or tried to apologize for slavery. But it also occurs to me that the Clinton administration did much to pave the way for Bush's domestic and foreign policies. This is not to say that I would not prefer a Clinton presidency today. Of course I would, but the continuity between the policies of these two administrations cannot be ignored. And I'm not sure that it would make a major difference to have a president intent on global dominance and willing to wage war to maintain U.S. hegemony who assumed a more apologetic or humble posture in the process. Too many progressive people identified with Clinton during his tenure as president and did not recognize the need for an organized

opposition. Had we responded more forcefully to the Clinton administration's attacks on Sudan and Iraq, it might have been possible to prevent the current war. And let us not forget that it was under the Clinton administration that the prison-industrial-complex began to be consolidated. It was during this period that it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between Republican and Democratic policies. Yet people who considered themselves progressive were far more willing to acknowledge Clinton as their leader. We are now in a position to draw important lessons about the failures of radical and progressive activism during that period.

I think that there is a kind of identification between the American public and the president. This is what Williams calls the imperial psychology. I mean it is just staggering that despite Bush's lying, deception, and manipulation, he manages to get reelected. When officers and presidents can trample on truth and law, as Arundhati Roy points out, we are in the midst of empire.¹⁸ Americans reelected him. Why? Isn't this part of that imperial psychology?

A moral panic was generated by 9/11 and the subsequent specter of terrorism, which puts security at the center of all conversations, both conversations in favor of the war on Iraq and conversations in opposition to the war on Iraq. This focus on security as internal and external policing helps to manufacture the ubiquitous fear that causes people to ignore those dimensions of security that would require attention to

such issues as health care, education, and housing, for example. The problem of the presidency is not primarily a question of deceit—most people, regardless of their political affiliations, and regardless of their level of education, take for granted the fact that politicians lie and deceive. That is the nature of the game and I am not sure that Bush is distinguished by his capacity to deceive. Bush was reelected precisely because of the panic generated by the September 11 attacks and because of the ease with which we were all entranced by the images and rhetoric of nationalism associated with claims of U.S. citizenship. American exceptionalism is taken for granted and there is no popular discourse that allows us to understand that the superiority of the United States is grounded in exploitation and repression.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the “nation” was offered as the primary mode of solidarity. That is to say, people were urged to seek refuge in their “Americanism,” rather than to imagine themselves in solidarity with people throughout the world, including in those countries later marked as constituting an “axis of evil.”

Why were we so quick to imagine the nation as the limit of human solidarity, precisely at a moment when people all over the world identified with our pain and suffering? Why was it not possible to receive that solidarity in a way that allowed us to return it and to imagine ourselves more broadly as citizens of the world? This would have allowed for the inclusion of people within the U.S. not legally defined as “cit-

izens.” The production of the nation as the primary mode of solidarity excluded those within and without who were not legally citizens. The brutal attacks on people who appeared to be Muslim or Arab announced that racism was very much alive in the U.S. and striking out at new targets. So I suppose I am more concerned about the ease with which this moral panic emerged than I am about presidential dishonesty and deception.

But more generally, as I reflect on my own political history, I can say that radical activism has always recognized that the government is not synonymous with the people. As simple as it seems, it may be especially important to emphasize this distinction today. The identification to which you referred is enabled precisely by the absence of a strong sense of community in struggle that does not have to look to the leadership of the government, especially not in times of war.

During the period before the international collapse of socialism, there existed the practice of designating those communities fighting for the rights of labor, against racism, for justice, peace and equality, as the “Other America.” Today, it seems that many of us who oppose the policies and practices of the Bush administration are still, at bottom, greatly influenced by the ideology of American exceptionalism. Thus the sense of paralysis in the aftermath of September 11, and the dangerous embrace of the worst kind of nationalism. This disturbs me more than anything else, because if we are to have hope for a better future, we will have to be capable of imag-

ining ourselves citizens of a new global order, which may well include our acceptance of leadership from people in Iraq, and from others engaged in frontline battles.

This may appear to be nostalgia for a political past that was less complicated than our present times. But actually, I am attempting to acknowledge the ways in which we sometimes tend to rely on the ideologies we think we are opposing.

One of our main challenges is to reconceptualize the notion of “security.” How can we help to make the world secure from the ravages of global capitalism? This broader sense of security might involve debt relief for Africa; it would mean an end to the juggernaut of privatization that threatens the new society people in South Africa have been trying to build. It would also involve the shifting of priorities from the prison-industrial-complex to education, housing, health care. Bush was reelected—or elected, since he was appointed into his first term rather than elected—precisely because of the moral panic that diverted people’s attention away from the more complicated questions about our future. Bush was elected because of the fear not only of another “terrorist” attack, but because of the fear that American global superiority may be on the wane.

I would like to ask you a question about the relationship between the production of law and the violation of law in the United States. One can't help but be disgusted by the glaring, self-serving character of some of the legal memoranda and presidential

acts and rulings. Take the category “enemy combatant,” and the suspension of the Geneva Conventions for people detained by the United States. The category “enemy combatant” does not exist in international law, as Barbara Olshansky of the The Center for Constitutional Rights has demonstrated.¹⁹ Yet the term creates a legal fiction for the sake of excluding enemy soldiers and alleged terrorists from the protection of the law. These legal appeals and memoranda give the impression of legality and lawfulness. We are left with this paradox in which there is an appeal to the law in order to make exceptions to the law.

The convoluted legalistic vocabulary produced by the war on terror would make great material for comedy if it did not have such brutal consequences. These new categories have been deployed as if they have a long history in law and common usage—as if they are self-evident—and their strategic effects of circumventing the Geneva Conventions and a host of human rights instruments have once again relied on the notion that the U.S. stands above the UN, the World Court, and everything else. I wonder whether this subterfuge doesn't point to a more general problem, that of the new political discourse generated by the Bush administration. The Bush vocabulary, which pretends to express complicated ideas in the most simple and unsophisticated terms, is both seductive and frightening. It is seductive because it appears to require no effort to understand; it is dangerous because it erases everything that really matters. Just as the meaning of “enemy com-

batant” is assumed to be self-evident, so are the meanings of the terms “freedom” and “democracy.”

This leveling of political discourse to the extent that it is not supposed to require any effort to understand—that it appear self-evident, incontrovertible, and logical—enables aggression and injury. This is true of the simplistic, often crude vocabulary that Bush tends to use, it is true of his repetition of the words freedom and democracy in ways that empty them of serious content, and it is true of his representation of terrorists as “evil doers.” But it is also true of such legalistic notions as “enemy combatant” and “extraordinary rendition.”

As mentioned earlier, the term “extraordinary rendition” describes the process of transporting prisoners to other countries for the purpose of having them interrogated. What the term hides is the fact that the countries to which these prisoners are “rendered” are known to employ torture. As Jane Mayer points out in her recent article in *The New Yorker*, this is a very widespread practice.²⁰ This practice allows the U.S. government to engage in torture, albeit indirectly. Again, I would argue that the production of this kind of political discourse that obfuscates, erases, and cuts off discussion under the guise of transparent legal jargon helps to fan moral panic about terrorism. These terms are designed to render discourse and discussion useless. So, on the one hand, if we analyze the Bushisms, as they have been called, they invoke laughter and comedy, thus preventing us from taking them

seriously. On the other hand, there is the legalistic jargon that has the semblance of having been produced within established and incontrovertible frameworks of law, so they are taken too seriously. I cannot remember a time in my life when political discourse was so convoluted. We should be deeply concerned about the extent to which this tends to foreclose popular critical engagement with the policies and practices of global war.

The British Court has referred to what is going on at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib as a “legal black hole.”²¹ What are the consequences of this legal black hole for human rights activists across the world?

Perhaps the lesson in all of this is that we need to find ways of contesting the absolute authority of law. We might phrase the following question: how do we use the law as a vehicle of progressive change, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the limits of the law—the limits of national law as well as international law. For example, we naturally assume that justice and equality are necessarily produced through the law. But the law cannot on its own create justice and equality. Here in the U.S., thirty years after the passage of what was considered unprecedented civil rights legislation, we are still plagued with many of the same problems of inequality relating to economics, race, and gender. In many instances, they are even more entrenched in the social

order. There are ways in which law can successfully be taken up strategically and thus can enable popular movements and campaigns. The focus of the civil rights movement was precisely on effecting change in the prevailing laws. But at the same time, the law produced the limits of those possible changes, as we can see in the way that affirmative action legislation has, in states like California, enabled its own demise.

The grand achievement of civil rights was to purge the law of its references to specific kinds of bodies, thus enabling racial equality before the law. But at the same time this process enabled racial inequality in the sense that the law was deprived of its capacity to acknowledge people as being racialized, as coming from racialized communities. Because the person that stands before the law is an abstract, rights-bearing subject, the law is unable to apprehend the unjust social realities in which many people live. To give a more concrete example, one that relates to the formation of the prison-industrial-complex, I would say that precisely because the law is unable to take into consideration those social conditions that render certain communities much more susceptible to imprisonment than others, the mechanism of formal due process justifies the racist and class character of prison populations. The law does not care whether this individual had access to good education or not, or whether he/she lives under impoverished conditions because companies in his/her communities have shut down and moved to a third world country, or whether previously available welfare payments

have vanished. The law does not care about the conditions that lead some communities along a trajectory that makes prison inevitable. Even though each individual has the right to due process, what is called the blindness of justice enables underlying racism and class bias to resolve the question of who gets to go to prison and who does not.

While I have been referring quite specifically to the U.S. context, I would also suggest that there are ways in which human rights activists should be attentive to the questions as well. Human rights instruments can be strategic tools in the struggle for global justice. But we cannot ignore larger processes, such as the movement of global capital, which assaults entire populations. Campaigns to defend the rights of immigrants in post-colonial urban centers in Europe and the U.S. must insist on the human rights of African, Latin American, Asian, and Arab immigrants. At the same time it is important to speak out against the impact of global capitalism as a central—though not the sole—motivation causing people to move across borders. This is a major challenge for human rights activists today. And, in fact, organizations like Amnesty International that have previously focused their work at the level of individual human rights claims, have now expanded their work to defend populations and communities as well as individuals. This requires the dual strategy of taking up the law and recognizing its limitations in order to address that which the law cannot apprehend.

Earlier on you began talking about the prison-industrial-complex and the vision for an “abolition democracy”? Can you elaborate?

First, the prison-industrial-complex is a result of the *failure* to enact abolition democracy. “Abolition democracy” is a term used by DuBois in his work *Black Reconstruction*, his germinal study of the period immediately following slavery. George Lipsitz uses it today within contemporary contexts. I will try to explain briefly its applicability to three forms of abolitionism: the abolition of slavery, the abolition of the death penalty, and the abolition of the prison. DuBois argued that the abolition of slavery was accomplished only in the negative sense. In order to achieve the *comprehensive* abolition of slavery—after the institution was rendered illegal and black people were released from their chains—new institutions should have been created to incorporate black people into the social order. The idea that every former slave was supposed to receive forty acres and a mule is sometimes mocked as an unsophisticated rumor that circulated among slaves. Actually, this notion originated in a military order that conferred abandoned Confederate lands to freed black people in some parts of the South. But the continued demand for land and the animals needed to work it reflected an understanding among former slaves that slavery could not be truly abolished until people were provided with the economic means for their subsistence. They also needed access to educational institutions and needed to claim voting and other political

rights, a process that had begun, but remained incomplete, during the short period of radical reconstruction that ended in 1877. DuBois thus argues that a host of democratic institutions are needed to fully achieve abolition—thus abolition democracy.

What, then, would it mean to abolish the death penalty? The problem is that most people assume that the only alternative to death is a life sentence without the possibility of parole. However, if we think about capital punishment as an inheritance of slavery, its abolition would also involve the creation of those institutions about which DuBois wrote—institutions that still remain to be built one hundred forty years after the end of slavery. If we link the abolition of capital punishment to the abolition of prisons, then we have to be willing to let go of the alternative of life without possibility of parole as the primary alternative. In thinking specifically about the abolition of prisons using the approach of abolition democracy, we would propose the creation of an array of social institutions that would begin to solve the social problems that set people on the track to prison, thereby helping to render the prison obsolete. There is a direct connection with slavery: when slavery was abolished, black people were set free, but they lacked access to the material resources that would enable them to fashion new, free lives. Prisons have thrived over the last century precisely because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery. They cannot, therefore, be eliminated

unless new institutions and resources are made available to those communities that provide, in large part, the human beings that make up the prison population.

If I understand your argument correctly, you are saying that the death penalty is part of the “wages of whiteness” that must be paid so as to maintain a racialized democracy, the democracy resulting from an unfulfilled abolition?

It depends on what you mean by “wages of whiteness.” If we rely on Roediger’s analyses, we define the “wages of whiteness” as the privileges of those who benefit from the persistence of racism. Though this may seem counterintuitive, I would argue that the death penalty is something akin to a “return of the repressed” racism of slavery, now let loose on whomever happens to be caught in its grasp, whether they’re racialized as black, Latino, Native American, or white. The most compelling explanation of the endurance of capital punishment in the U.S.—the only advanced industrialized nation that executes its citizens routinely—can be discovered in its embeddedness in slavery and in the way the racism of slavery caused it to be differentially inflicted on black people. In the aftermath of slavery, the death penalty was incorporated into the legal system with its overt racism gradually concealed. In this era of “equal opportunity” it now also targets more than just the black or Latino communities. In this sense, one might argue that when white people are executed,

it is more a sign of the revenge of racism, rather than the "wages of whiteness."

Let me see if I can back up and say just a few words about racism in the contemporary era, racism in the post-civil rights era, the mutations and alterations of racism, racism at a time when members of under-represented racialized groups have now been offered powerful leadership positions. How would an accessible analysis of racism address the fact that a black woman, previously National Security Advisor, is now Secretary of State, and that a Latino is Attorney General? Of course this new racial integration is represented as the face of the perfect multicultural nation. This apparent dilemma can be accounted for by recognizing that racism is something that is far deeper than that which can be resolved through processes of diversification and multiculturalism. There are persisting structures of racism, economic and political structures that do not openly display their discriminatory strategies, but nonetheless serve to keep communities of color in a state of inferiority and oppression.

Therefore I think about the death penalty as incorporating the historical inheritances of racism within the framework of a legal system that has been evacuated of overt racism, while continuing to provide a haven for the inheritances of racism. This is how it can be explained that capital punishment is still very much alive in a country that presents itself as the paragon for democracy in the world. There are more than 3,500 U.S citizens currently on death row in the

United States at a time when all European countries have abolished capital punishment, when the European Union makes abolition of the death penalty a precondition for membership. Capital punishment is a receptacle for the legacies of racism, but now, under the rule of legal equality, it can apply its power to anyone, regardless of their racial background.

You mentioned Condoleezza Rice, Alberto Gonzalez, and Colin Powell as people who make it appear as if Americans live in a racial democracy. Could you elaborate on the relationship between abolition democracy and identity politics?

Of course, I am being sarcastic when I refer to the U.S. as a "racial democracy," now that we have people of color in high positions in government and the corporate world. Particular individuals are not inevitably linked to the structures of oppression implied by their racial backgrounds. Neither are they compelled to represent those who continue to bear the brunt of racism. Many years ago Dr. Martin Luther King criticized black people who climbed out of the muddy swamps on the backs of their sisters and brothers. It is inconceivable that these individuals would be where they are now, without the pressures of the movement for civil rights and racial democracy, and so it appears to be a contradiction that people of color can play major roles in sustaining contemporary racism. But, in actuality, it is more an inevitable consequence

of the struggle for equality. The lesson in all this is that we need to shift our understandings of racism. In an earlier era, one of the most obvious signs of racism was the absence of people of color in governmental and economic leadership positions, which reflected more generalized forms of overt discrimination. But racism does not of necessity vanish with the appearance of individual people of color within those institutions that bear responsibility for the workings of racism. In fact, I would argue that racism is even more effective and more devastating today than it was during the era that produced the Civil Rights movement. This country's imprisoned population provides a dramatic example: among the more than two million people currently in prison, over seventy percent are people of color.

I don't know if you saw some of the confirmation hearings for Condeleeza Rice or Alberto Gonzales, but it was an incredible display of Machiavellian identity politics. In fact, you could almost talk about a Republican identity politics.

These developments indicate the limitations of the strategies of multiculturalism and diversity, which currently define official efforts to eradicate racism. Identity, by itself, has never been an adequate criterion around which communities of struggle could be organized—not even during those periods when we imagined identity as the most powerful engine of movements. Communities are always political

projects, political projects that can never solely rely on identity. Even during the period when black unity was assumed to be the sine qua non of struggle, it was more a fiction than anything else. The class, gender, and sexual fissures that lurked just beneath the construction of unity eventually exposed these and other heterogeneities that made “unity” an impossible dream.

It is interesting how much more difficult it is to transform discourses than it is to build new institutions. Many decades after the fiction of black unity was exposed, the most popular assumption within black communities is that unity alone will bring progress. Even now, when we can point to the Condoleezza Rices and Clarence Thomases, people retain this dream of unity. Young people who are just beginning to develop a sense of themselves in the world assume that the only way we can make a better future for the many black people who lead economically and intellectually impoverished lives is by uniting the entire black community. I hear this repeatedly. What would be the purpose of uniting the black community? How would one possibly bring people together across all of the complicated lines of politics and class? It would be futile to try to create a single black community today. But it does make sense to think about organizing communities, not simply around their blackness, but primarily around political goals. Political struggle has never really been so much a question about how it is identified or chooses to identify, as it has been a question of how one thinks race, gen-

der, class or sexuality affect the way human relations are constructed in the world. During Black History Month or Women's History Month, we always tend to talk about the "firsts": the first black woman astronaut, the first woman Supreme Court justice, the first black surgeon, etc. Condoleezza Rice was the first black woman to become secretary of state. As I have said many times, I would gladly give up the occasion to celebrate this as a victory in exchange for a white male secretary of state who would be capable of giving leadership to those of us who want to put an end to global war.

Can you talk about how an American democracy of false equalities and empty universals might be connected to the kind of torture, and gender diverse torturers, we witnessed at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib?

The meaning lurking behind the model of "democracy" promulgated by the Bush administrations is the fraudulent equality of the capitalist market, the freedom it illusively offers to all. Marx exposed long ago the profound inequalities that constitute the basis of what I still like to call bourgeois democracy. But the policies and pronouncements of the Bush administration amount to a parody of even those distortions. When democracy is reduced to the simple fact of elections—never mind that they were prepared by the mass brutality and destruction inflicted on Iraq by the U.S. military—whatever we might consider to be freedom has disap-

peared. Those who present the gender and racial composition of the U.S. military as a dramatic example of the equality offered by democracy have clearly lost sight of whatever promise democracy might hold for the future. Gender equality in the military is represented as the equal opportunity to participate in every aspect of military life, including equal opportunity to participate in the violence previously assumed to be the purview of men. This approach to equality leaves no space to challenge the status quo. The irony that women helped inflict physical, mental, and sexual torture at Abu Ghraib is that their involvement points to the extent to which this formal, abstract democracy has been successful in the military. When equality is measured in terms of access to repressive institutions that remain unchanged or even become strengthened by the admission of those who were previously barred, it seems to me that we need to insist on different criteria for democracy: substantive as well as formal rights, the right to be free of violence, the right to employment, housing, healthcare, and quality education. In brief, socialist, rather than capitalist conceptions of democracy.