



Alex Finklestein and Dr. Jae James

Interview with Dr. Jae James

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University of Oklahoma Carceral Studies Conversations Podcast.
<https://architecture.ou.edu/csc/>

S1 Welcome to carceral studies conversations. This is a podcast series that seeks to understand and illuminate the carceral state and all of its manifestations and allow us to both understand and then deconstruct these complex systems that structure our society as a way to pursue liberation and justice. I am Alex, I'm recording from the University of Oklahoma which is on the traditional lands of the Kato Nation and the Wichita and affiliated tribes and was also part of the Muskogee, Creek, and Seminole Nations. My guest today, Dr. Jae James, is recording on the ancestral Annope (SP) homelands in New York City. Our guest is a professor of social work at New York University. His research and experiences lead him to be a pragmatically idealistic and hopeful humanitarian committed to the evolution of self, social justice, and critical pedagogy. He is the director of the Evolving Justice Initiative: an educational initiative to build community and explore justice in action which we'll hear a little bit more about today. Thank you so much for being in conversation today

Professor James.

S2 Hey, thank you. I'm excited to be here. I am actually in Philadelphia, and I don't know what captured land this is but to also acknowledge that Philadelphia, as much of the United States, as much of the world, is captured land so much love to the aborigines people who existed here, whose histories have been whitewashed in white supremacy.

S1 Absolutely, thanks for correcting me and making that statement because it's important especially as we're talking about systems of colonization and systems of oppression it's important to recognize that. So, I want to start off with this idea, in your research you've called mass incarceration a pandemic. Can you explain how mass incarceration is a pandemic?

S2 Well, so a pandemic is something - similar to COVID-19 - that impacts

people on a global level. To even talk about mass incarceration, I think the first thing I should say is that the term is a euphemism. If we look at the mechanisms that drove slavery, they are the same mechanisms that drive mass incarceration. If we look at the 13th amendment, there's a lot of evidence that shows the end of slavery but also the transition into the prison industrial labor, you saw convict leasing system, you saw Black codes, you saw ideologies that substantiated criminality. Today we have more Black men incarcerated than the number enslaved in 1850. This is not only an American thing, if you look at many of the countries in diaspora people of color are similarly impacted disproportionately via carceral systems. It's a framework and a model that has been utilized throughout the world to continue the historical oppression of people of color.

S1 I appreciate you putting it that way and tracing that historical

lens. Some people might posit that mass incarceration is a backlash to the civil rights movement but it sounds like you're putting it in this longer, continued strain of exploitation of labor.

S2 You can almost see two waves - and maybe we are going into the third if we aren't careful - but in terms of the level of deportation, in terms of the level of electronic monitoring that has taken place. The first wave comes in just post the 13th amendment in the form of Black codes. You fast forward 100 years and post-civil rights we see new Black codes, the war on drugs, stop and frisk, mandatory minimums, etc. So we have seen waves of this. Interestingly enough, you bring up the civil rights movement which is 100 years after reconstruction. A period where America was supposed to pause and take note of the damage it has historically done to people of color in the United States and do something differently. So when that doesn't happen 100 years later the fight and struggle persists. Fast-forward to where we are right now and the fight and the struggle still continues. I think we have seen various aspects of mass incarceration. And let's not even call it mass incarceration. It's like neo-slavery, hyper-incarceration or whatever we want to call it, predominantly focusing on men of color in the US and seeing women of color as the fastest

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growing prison population. But also seeing carceral systems as a way of legitimizing or dehumanizing people. Once the term of criminal is affixed to you, your humanity doesn't really matter anymore. We are seeing that with the wave of police killings taking place in the US. As soon as someone is purported to have a "criminal background" it means their humanity is now somehow questioned.

S1 Yeah, great point about the dehumanization and that its more than just imprisonment. It's this larger system that includes stigmatization, over-policing, surveillance that slowly or quickly erodes a persons perceived legitimacy to be in the world. We have focused so far on the US and these systems, but as you point out this is a global phenomenon. In Africa and in the Caribbean, people of color are disproportionately surveilled, incarcerated, exploited, etc. How would you frame this pandemic or neo-slavery as a global phenomenon?

S2 I think it's the same framework. One of the things we don't talk about is that racial injustice isn't just people making choices happenstance. Racial injustice is predicated on capitalism and capitalism is predicated on having an exploited class. There's a really good word I like "sancopha (SP)" and it's a West African proverb that to understand where you're going you have to understand where you're from. I think too often we have these conversations too soon. Using a historical perspective is critical and so too is understanding the mechanisms of oppression. Initially it was okay to just say Blacks were enslaved because they were lazy or not as smart. And as that became played out there was a need for a new mechanism to justify their

exploitation. There's an analogy I like to use that slavery was the engine that built America and really much of the world. Much of the "G8" and these countries with considerable wealth. This wealth is a byproduct of colonialization and exploitation of countries of color. When you take the engine out of a car, if you want it to keep going you need another engine. Where slavery was once that engine, the ideologies have now shifted. The ideologies that justify this new mechanism of exploitation are now tied to carceral systems and the dehumanization of people of color. If you look at most of the people who have been vestiges of the legacy of slavery, they are predominantly the people that make up the majority of carceral systems. Not just in the US but in most of the world. You have a formula and a blueprint that is tried and true that has been exported. I am from Jamaica so maybe you don't see the carceral state in the same racial way that it exists in the US but you see according to class, those who are imprisoned are those who have been permanently disenfranchised in that system. You can see this framework operating worldwide. Once someone is identified as a criminal, our empathy toward their plight is eroded.

S1 That's really interesting.

I want to follow up on a few things, I like that you put that in perspective. The global exportation of racial capitalism. That capitalism requires these

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hierarchies and divisions between people which are often predicated on race or perceived racial differences. They create these permanent inequities and injustices that I want to follow up on. As a social worker you studied the clinical impact of mass incarceration or neo-slavery to use your term. What is the clinical impact and how does that impact or trauma extend beyond imprisonment to inform these cycles of re-entry or recidivism.

S2 I'll share how I came to the work. At 18 years old in 1994 I was arrested and tried under the Rockefeller drug laws. I had never been arrested before. I was arrested on a series of conspiracy charges. At arraignment I was offered 40 years to life at 18 years old. This wasn't just my story, this was the height of what we would call mass incarceration.

You think about 1994 and you think about Wu Tang Clan, "40 of us in the back of a bus, life as a shorty shouldn't be so ruff." Everyone, Tupac's "Dear Mama", everyone is talking about what's happening. I would ultimately be sentenced to 7 years to life at 18, and the judge told me he was doing me a favor. After this experience

I really knew what this system was and I really wanted to destroy it

knowing the impact. That impact is millions of people incarcerated, millions of people disenfranchised, children being separated from their parents. It was always like, yeah, that's the impact. I was finishing - years removed from this situation - I'm finishing my doctorate. I am pretty sure I'm done. I've mapped the history of prisons in the US. I've tied in the lineage of mass incarceration through the 13th amendment. 200 something pages. I bring it to my dissertation chair and he says what's the impact and I asked immediately, "What do you mean?! I've just shown you how people were impacted." And he pushed me further asking how are people impacted - what's the clinical impact? That's when I really started to pause and look into trauma and realize oppression is trauma. We cant have this conversation without talking about trauma. One of the things that immediately struck me was even the clinical understanding we had of trauma told you that it was following an experience. So most of what it was talking about was PTSD and the impact it has on people biologically and the immense harm for those who experience trauma. But there wasn't an analysis of trauma that

was never "post". There wasn't an analysis of a trauma that was 400, 500 years old. As I began to think about that and the impact of trauma, I realized that conversation needed to be synonymous because it was AS important as any conversation around liberation. I don't think we are ever really able to quantify this trauma. We can maybe quantify through how many people are locked up or dollars lost, but this is something so beyond. Generations have felt the impact of slavery. Generations will feel the impact of mass incarceration unless we really begin to heal. It's an incredible question that really deserves a lot of attention but we would all be naïve to say that we know the impact. Nobody can quantify what that impact is.

S1 Yeah, that's really interesting because it makes me think of some theorists, like Ruthie Gilmore, who have defined racism as these systems or policies that lead to premature death with death being the thing that is quantifiable in the end. It seems like you're pushing back on that saying yes there is premature death but ALSO you need to recognize the conditions; the harms that are experienced in life.

S2 Absolutely, I mean if you think about it I think there's nothing that can be separated from trauma. You look at a child growing up and there is this really excellent research called ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) and it looked at disruption in the family ecosystem which can have a lifelong impact. When you think about most people of color in the US, ACEs is what they have lived under. The family structures are often compromised. Even when we think about harm, which is often

characterized as a physical thing, imagine living in a world where whiteness has been synonymous with good while darkness has been synonymous with bad. Seeing that play out at every level of your existence, seeing that play out when you go to school, seeing that play out in all of the stories you are told, all of the movies, heroes and villains. Think about the internalization of that and add layers of poverty, the folks who are bearing the brunt of this, imagine how that impacts their day to day. In communities where violence is disproportionately high, we cannot imagine the levels of trauma they have experienced. The levels of policing is a violent experience. Poverty is a violent experience. Hopelessness is a violent experience. We have to have a more intersectional analysis. Why have we not ever thought about oppressed peoples as traumatized? Neo-capitalism and neo-colonialism have emphasized that we are all autonomous agents, nothing happens in the collective. It is a "to each their own" idea that is bull shit. Until we are able to really have these conversations that are wholistic, we will not progress. I love Audre Lorde quote, "[T]here are no single-issue issues." Until we are utilizing an intersectional analysis to think about all of these sources of harm and our own

response, it will feel like we are continually stuck in this cycle.

S1 Great point. It's interesting that you're expanding this definition of violence to be material, psychological, intergenerational, it doesn't end with an individual, it is community based. I want to turn to what you mentioned about seeking a solution. What does liberation or justice look like under this new definition of violence and trauma?

S2 One of the first steps in everything is awareness. It's the quote from James Baldwin, "not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Again, none of these things are based on new arguments. Baldwin, bell hooks, even further back ancestors have gone about laying the groundwork for what solutions may be. We all have to create these brave-spaces that are really dedicated to liberation. Rethinking educational paradigms and becoming comfortable with the tension required to seek truth. So much of that is contingent on our own feelings. If we are in constant states of trauma, our ability to think and act is hampered. For people who don't see these problems as synonymous they are likely burnt out themselves and shouldn't be at the forefront of these movements.

It is critical that we create the healing necessary for everyone to show up and assess the problem at hand to develop an appropriate response. In heightened states of trauma we can only be reactive. As much as my anger may be valid, it will not evoke thoughtful solutions that serve anybody. It feels cliché, but self-care is an act of political resistance. It is a really challenging question but the focus needs to be on items that are already within our control to start. We need to create awareness of oppression and history at a community level. Another thing that is critical is the creation of liberatory communities because this effort needs to be co-created. When I think about liberation, bell hooks told us, "education must be a field in which we all labor." Liberation must also be a field in which we all labor. We all have to do the work.

S1 And you've been doing some of that work. I would like to give you a chance to talk about one of these brave-spaces you've created at the Evolving Justice Space in New York to create this new paradigm that balances the tension of seeking liberation and reducing harm without the creation of new harm. What does this space look like?

S2 bell hooks has this saying that, "We have to move from an ethos of domination to an ethos of love." I work under the umbrella of "evolve" and the first four letters are love. It's quite simple. I truly believe our liberation will be through community. Thinking about systems of oppression, they have been built around these divides that limit the visibility of our mutual humanity. Before I talk about the evolving justice framework, I created this framework that I usually preface with "who is the best

rapper?" and let people talk smack for a bit. Then I bring in B.I.G. where the "B" stands for bias and bringing into the conversation this education system that we were all brought up under. Understanding that we all grew-up under this umbrella, we can understand that there would be bias against any alternative viewpoints from beyond that scope. To work around this bias, we have to bring about the inquire about our ("I") intentions. These are very intentional spaces. Is the intention to learn or have our beliefs reaffirmed, why are we here? Everyone now where we have such a divide needs to be very intentional. I always ask people what is their north star, their guiding principle. Once that intention is set, we can dig into setting ("G") ground-rules of a community. It's a question of what will make each person to feel grounded in this space. Where people feel listened to with the intent to hear instead of the intent to respond. Really creating basic community practices that allow everyone to show up and bring their expertise and experience to then co-create awareness and action.

"It may feel like we need to react but there is still such a need to build awareness. Even those who experience the effects, they have no idea what systems exist to create problems like mass-incarceration."

S1 I love that phrasing where you are creating an intent to listen as opposed to an intent to respond. Beautiful turn of phrase for a community centered movement and beautiful idea

as a practice. This conversation has been great, I think you've given those who are teaching and engaging in this community a lot to think about and strive for. I want to end with the closing question we ask on this podcast, what makes you hopeful today?

S2 I'm alive! I mean I'm really just going to jack everybody today, but there is this great bell hooks speech where she says, "I'm alive and because I'm alive I have to be hopeful." Hope isn't an academic discussion. The fact that I'm alive means I have hope. For me, it is really a recognition and honoring of just how many have really sacrificed just for us all to be here. That for me is incredibly humbling. To carry that torch of hope so to speak is very humbling. As dark as it may feel, it has been implicitly

darker. I have been blessed to go to Africa a few times, to go to Ghana and be at the door of no return. What that experience must have been, that trans-Atlantic

journey. The first winters on plantations. The brutality that took place there. To know that this is not just an African

experience. To know that all people of color have experienced great levels of brutality throughout the legacy and history of the quest for white supremacy. To see the level of consciousness being raised around these issues. Five years ago we wouldn't be having this conversation without people labeling us as communists or something. I feel incredibly blessed to be in this position to engage in these conversations and see them happening not only here but worldwide. This feels like Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point". We build these satellites that can help amplify the knowledge until everyone starts to connect. It is such a critical part of change. It may feel like we need to react but there is still such a need to build awareness. Even those who experience the effects, they have no idea what systems exist to create problems like mass-incarceration. Their dad may have been in jail for 20 years but they have no understanding of why. I look at the power of words and of narratives, these theories of liberation are always predicated on story-telling, people being able to share their stories and experiences. Today more than ever I see spaces where people are being give the ability to share their stories and that creates a tremendous amount of hope for me.

S1 I love that answer. Robin Kelley among others have written about how studying, learning, building that awareness is itself this radical act of protest. It starts with these satellites of grassroots, local communities that can hopefully build to a global movement to deconstruct racial supremacy.

S1 This has been such a wonderful conversation! I want to thank you so much for being on today and sharing what you know.

S2 No, thank you man, and thank you for bringing this out to people. Everyone that's listening, continue to search. This is a time where we all need to ask the "why" about our communities and the "why" about ourselves.

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