ABOLISH BIG DATA

I learned very early in life that zipcode is destiny. I will never forget my first year of middle school when our Assistant Principal took the stage to welcome us to the next three years of k-12 education, but also the rest of our lives.

"We are in the era of Zero Tolerance," his words exactly, spoken loudly over the speakers in our assembly room. "One strike and you are out, you mess up, and there are no second chances." I can still remember the silence that fell over the room of energetic eleven and twelve year olds, not sure what to expect out of middle school, but so happy to finally be out of elementary school. We had been waiting for this moment, to be big kids, to choose electives and have a rotating schedule.

His words struck something deep within me, and though there are stretches of my childhood I don't remember, I have made myself forget, I remember this day clearly. I remember locking eyes with other children from my elementary school, searching their glances, wondering if the sudden fear I felt they also shared. They looked back at me. This was when we would all learn to police ourselves to avoid over-policing. This was when we would learn to navigate the world in our Blackness and youngness in a way to avoid being a problem. It was then that we would learn that to be us would mean to be in trouble. We had done nothing wrong.

It was not until high school as a youth organizer that I would learn about the the Crack Baby Myth, a study with only 23 participants that would come to influence a regime of policy, practices and culture that would shape our experiences in that auditorium and beyond. It was not until I was in college that I would have the data literacy to understand tracking, how and why the very children I grew up with that lived close to the school on a census tract spanning a few blocks, were automatically enrolled in alternative education classes, marked by a label in the same way the late Devah Pager wrote about the mark of a criminal record. Many of these children would later become incarcerated themselves. I think about that, how if it wasn't for the courageous advocacy on behalf of my mother, who spoke English and worked at home, that there would be no Data for Black Lives, and even more, there is a chance I would not even be alive.

Big data is more than a collection of technologies, a vast amount of information and different types of it. It is more than a revolution in measurement and prediction. It has become a philosophy, an ideological regime, about how decisions are made and who makes them. It has given legitimacy to a new form of social and political control that has taken the digital artifacts of our existence and found new ways to use it against us.

Big Data is not new. It is not as novel or revolutionary as we worship it to be. It is apart of a long and pervasive historical legacy and technological timeline of scientific oppression, aggressive public policy and the most influential political and economic system that has and continues to shape this country's economy, chattel slavery. Algorithms and other Big Data technologies are the engines that have facilitated the evolution of chattel slavery into the the Prison Industrial Complex, the militarization of schoolyards and borders alike, and the incarceration of the futures of millions of Americans of all races into peonage, modern day debt slavery. Just because something is a new technology doesn't make it innovative.

This essay is a call to action, but also a personal testimony about why we need to abolish big data. This is not a call to end all use of data, quite the opposite. It is an opportunity for us all to apply the organizing methods and approaches of the primordial social reform movement of this country, the abolition of slavery, and the most significant movement of our generation, the abolition of prisons, to address the leviathan that is the Big Data Industrial Complex.

This is a call to action to reject the concentration of Big Data into the hands of a few, to challenge the structures that allow it to be wielded as a weapon of immense political influence. It is a call to action on behalf of the Data for Black Lives movement for us to reckon with the reality of the future to come, a future where data is destiny.

Data is power. Big Data is fascism. To Abolish Big Data would mean to put data in the hands of the people who need it the most.

This call to action is an open door for all to come in, sit and listen. It is a new opportunity to pick up our tools, our own skills and experiences and toil beside each other. We have a lot to abolish, but there is also so much to build. And we are ready.

Welcome to Data for Black Lives II.

TOWARDS ABOLITION

Abolition is a process, not an end goal. It is the rejection of prisons as the "answer" to the most pressing social problems. For too long prisons has been the response to mental trauma and illness, addiction and poverty. They have become the answer as international trade agreements and the decline of industry have made it clear that there is no role for young Black men and women in the global economy. Prisons have become public housing where policies and political will fail. Increasingly, they have become the "answer" to the disappearance of jobs due to automation, a culture of incarceration that is normalized on Netflix as much as it is accepted by those who argue for work-around solutions masked as reform.

How do we imagine a world without prisons when that is all we know? How did our ancestors imagine freedom, and fight for it, while still in chains? The process of Abolition begins in our minds--in our organizations, our academic institutions. It is a new way of understanding the world. And if there is any venue that allows for the imagination to result in exponential change, it is technology. The opportunity we have with data to abolish and reimagine and recreate new structures of knowledge production, new forms of decision making and new ways of relating to each other are infinite.

"Abolitionist steps are about gaining ground in the constant effort to radically transform society. They are about chipping away at oppressive institutions rather than helping them live longer. They are about pushing critical consciousness, gaining more resources, building larger coalitions, and developing more skills for future campaigns. They are about making the ultimate goal of abolition more possible"

-Critical Resistance Handbook

Right now, abolition is more possible than ever. This year we will publish a series of essays under the Abolish Big Data series written by voices from the Data for Black Lives network. These articles will be rolled out on a blog to be launched in 2019:

ABOLISH FICO | ABOLISH DEBT | ABOLISH COST OF LIVING
ABOLISH PRISONS | ABOLISH GDP | ABOLISH ICE

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