

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

James Ramsey

The 2020–2021 school year has been a time marked by, among other things, death. The global COVID-19 pandemic has raged on since our last edition and has continued to ravage marginalized communities all over the world—Black and Indigenous folk in particular, along with, as of the writing of this note, a concerning and burgeoning crisis in India. And in the midst of this, nearly 600,000 dead in the United States alone with many more suffering the disease’s collateral effects, Black folk in the United States, as many have observed, have been particularly and uniquely plagued by a still-murderous and -extractive system of policing and prison. Here, these violences form the contours of social life and its attendant sociopolitical order. The law, among other things, structures and enforces this order.

This order, if Black folk are to live and live freely, cannot stand as-is. We are in desperate need of alternatives to the status quo and different ways of being that push back against the deadly anti-Blackness that saturates our world, toward possibilities of Black, thriving life. This, as the events of this past year have painfully reminded us, is a matter of life and death. In this spirit, the theme of this year’s edition is “Uprising: Resistance as Abolition, Abolition as Resistance.” We sought submissions that dealt broadly with various forms of resistance to anti-Blackness, the abolition of prisons and police, and their intersections. Our understanding of abolition borrows from the insights of forerunners like Angela Davis, who observes that the abolition of prisons, for example, entails a more thorough transformation of society, which is to say its prevailing power arrangements:

“To reiterate, rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of our society. Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition.”¹

In other words, abolition implicates hearts and minds at least as much as it calls attention to the law, its actors and vectors, and/or more formalized societal structures. This requires different ways of thinking and conversations across disciplines. As such, the 37th edition of the *BlackLetter*

1. ANGELA Y. DAVIS, ARE PRISONS OBSOLETE? 108 (2003).

Law Journal, while relatively sleek, features the voices of scholars, artists, lawyers, formerly incarcerated people, students, and more that address a range of topics and discourses, all orbiting around a central concern: the protection and expression of Black life in an anti-Black milieu itself bolstered by a carceral state. First, visual artist John Sherman's three illustrations creatively render the harrowing experiences of his and others' incarceration in prison. Next, Karl Muth's article analyzes the legal underpinnings of the systemic and discriminatory disarmament of Black men in the United States, which works to weaken their capacity to defend themselves and their communities against, among other things, a tyrannical state. Third, LaTrina Johnson-Brown's poem is a dedication to Black girlhood, resistance, and radical self-love. Fourth, Stephen Plass's article demonstrates how, through arbitration, police in the United States immunize themselves against accountability to the public for their misconduct, most often allowing cycles of anti-Black police violence to continue. Finally, Alexis Yeboah-Kodie's piece melds memoir; interview excerpts from a variety of activists, lawyers, artists, and movement workers; and her own visual art to reflect on different dimensions of joy, work, Black liberation, and leadership.

To exhume and eradicate the depths of the suffering around us, uprising, revolution, apocalypse, making all things new, abolition, and/or whatever else signifies an end to anti-Black oppression is work that must center the perspectives and experiences of the dispossessed, those who are killed and robbed under the prevailing social order as a matter of default and policy. This year's edition is our modest attempt to demonstrate this principle and work out what the work of freedom has to do with the law. If, in Assata Shakur's words, it is our duty to fight for our freedom, to love one another, and to win, then, as at least a starting point, our duty involves creative conversation—communal explication of the circumstances around us, our souls, and possibilities for more life-giving ways of being for us and for those who come after. Our duty requires us to think with and alongside Black folk for the sake of Black life, even under what is evidently persistent, constitutive, intractable, variegated violence. This is the work and legacy we at the Harvard BlackLetter Law Journal feel called to participate in, and we give our sincerest thanks for your engagement.