Roadmap to Abolition: A Counter-mapping Project to Advance Understanding of the Theory and Practice of Abolition

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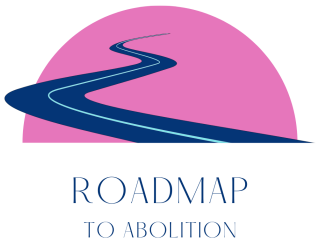

Fig. 1. Logo for digital mapping project The Roadmap to Abolition

Prison and police abolition is broadly considered to be a radicalist political view within the United States. Most Americans oppose the political philosophy, arguing that prison and police abolitionism is infeasible. Prison and police abolitionists, in contrast, have already provided alternatives to prisons and policing through community action. Counter-mapping, a critical cartographic practice, can be used to render visible the landscapes of abolitionist place-making necessary to create a future without prisons or police. In this paper, we argue for an interdisciplinary intervention, The Roadmap to Abolition, combining HCI and counter-mapping to bridge the gap between public understanding of the theory and practice of abolition, with the ultimate aim to use research to advance justice for those harmed by the prison industrial complex.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: counter-mapping, social justice, abolition, hci

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1 INTRODUCTION

Prison and police abolitionism demands a world without carceral or punitive systems, which inflict violence on individuals, families, and communities. The ideology is broadly considered to be a radical political view within the United States. Most Americans oppose abolitionism, arguing that prison and police abolitionism is infeasible. For example, without prisons and policing, many Americans are unsure who they would call in the event of an emergency or who would enforce the law. They are also unsure how violent crime would be deterred in the absence of police or prisons. Recent movements to defund the police have not received support from the majority of Americans [10].

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Prison and police abolitionists have already provided alternatives to prisons and policing through community action. These alternatives largely focus on building institutions that offer community support and critical resources. For example, studies have shown that housing the homeless reduces crime victimization [9]. In other cases, alternatives focus on using other non-police populations as first responders. One popular effort of a police-alternative program is Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) which was created in Oregon in 1989 to specifically support the city's response to mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness using a dual response of a crisis intervention workers and EMTs[4]. While there have been efforts to document abolitionist resources and organizations through databases, articles, stories, and poetry, there has been little work to document abolitionist practice in a simultaneously spatial, practical, and human way [3],[2],[1],[5].

Counter-mapping is a critical cartographic practice that can be used to address this dearth of spatial and personal documentation of abolitionist practice. Counter-mapping refers to a set of critical cartographic and feminist data visualization practices that seek to render visible the landscapes, lives, and sites of resistance and dispossession elided in capitalist, colonial, and liberal topographies [13], [11]. At its core, counter-mapping appropriates mapping techniques to center voices, narratives, geographies of oppressed populations from views that are typically left out. For example, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is an example of counter-mapping because it harnesses methods (such as oral history) and includes audiences (such as those who have been dispossessed), that are typically sidelined, in the creation of a map that renders visible struggles against gentrification in the San Francisco Bay Area [11]. Another example includes "WE NEVER WANTED HIM HERE" which is a zine and digital map that juxtaposes street names commemorating Christopher Columbus with sites of Indigenous resistance to replace Columbus memorials with memorials celebrating Indigenous peoples [8]. Counter-mapping can similarly be used to render visible the landscapes of abolitionist place-making necessary to create a future without prisons or police. Whereas a map created with influences of white supremacy and hierarchy might focus on understanding high-crime areas, a counter-map might focus on highlighting spaces that provide mutual aid services that divert crime. Counter-mapping has been introduced in the HCI field by a few scholars [7], [6], still, the study of how HCI and counter-mapping can, when combined, be used to augment understanding of and action on social justice issues is nascent.

In this paper, we argue for an interdisciplinary intervention, working title: The Roadmap to Abolition, combining HCI and counter-mapping to bridge the gap between public understanding of the theory and practice of abolition, with the ultimate aim to use research to advance justice for those harmed by the prison industrial complex. We describe an effort using ethnographic research methods to create a digital map of community models and organizations in Massachusetts that work to address community safety, violence, and harm without policing and incarceration. We seek to include organizations that facilitate prevention programs, diversion, mediation, mutual aid and more. This digital map will include a guided tour through real public safety scenarios and provide information about how particular organizations have addressed these scenarios in the past. This project will be a living database that educates the public about local alternatives to prisons and policing that keep our communities safe, demonstrates geographically a practical road map to abolition and serves as a point of inspiration and coalition building for people working towards prison and police abolition. The research questions undergirding these project objectives are:

(1) How can HCI for social justice and critical cartography bridge the gap between public understanding of the theory and practice of abolition?
(2) How can HCI design interventions which both make an impactful contribution to HCI literature while still impacting the lives of the vulnerable populations social justice activists are attempting to help?

These research questions are part of a broader series of questions in the Human-Computer Interaction, critical geography, and Social Computing fields. These fields attempt to understand the social context in which digital systems are designed, how they can be designed ethically, and what mapping can teach us about the sociopolitical landscape.

2 METHODS

The Roadmap to Abolition mapping project involves stakeholder engagement, content curation and digital design. Following in the footsteps of Critical Race Theory for HCI, we collect and weave together a variety of individual stories[12]. In our study, we weave together stories from prison and police abolitionists in order to obtain a broad view of the problems, needs, and successes of these organizations . We aim to connect with organizations that provide care or services that would make police or prisons obsolete. For example, organizations that offer aid to homeless people could mitigate the use of police to relocate homeless people. Or, organizations that offer services based on restorative justice practices could help to address harm or wrongdoing without utilizing arrests or incarceration. We will include organizations that may not explicitly identify as abolitionist but offer relevant services. We utilize ethnographic research methods including interviews to obtain a deep understanding of abolitionist organizations in their natural environments by considering the communities in which they operate, their social relationships and their current uses of digital tools. Based on these needs, we will then thematically code the interviews and develop a series of design goals for our digital map and storytelling system. We will then go back to these organizations and solicit feedback to ensure that the design goals we've laid out with these organizations have been addressed.

Once the design goals are mutually agreed upon, we will enter into the design and fabrication stage of the project using tools like Mapbox and other digital storytelling tools to communicate the stories from the participating organizations. Examples of stories may include 'transformative' efforts that transform underlying conditions that could lead to crime (housing, food insecurity etc), 'restorative' efforts to mediate conflict between two or more parties, and campaigns that advance self-determination by allocating funds or resources to build new institutions or supports. If it aligns with the design goals developed by us and the prison abolitionist organizations, we will then develop two modes for moving through the roadmap. In the first mode, the general public will be given a guided tour through the map that will show them different examples of organizations in the Boston area and help them understand the alternative system of care that is being developed. The second mode will allow for freeform exploration, in which anyone can explore the map and find different examples of organizations in the Boston area that are contributing to a system of care. Stories will include anecdotes about difficulties these organizations have been having in establishing a system of care, and specific anecdotes about how they have provided an alternative to prison and policing.

2.1 Preliminary Work

A preliminary version of the map was developed during the Feminist Futures Hackathon at the MIT Media Lab (see Figures 2 and 3). Working in collaboration with the feminist prison abolitionist organization Sisters Unchained, we developed a digital map that visualized different abolitionist organizations in California. Because Sisters Unchained expressed interest in having us develop the work further, we have continued to develop the project for the Boston area.

3 DESIRED OUTCOMES

We hope that this mapping tool will have sociopolitical and design implications about designing for prison and police abolition and highlight the implications of designing for any social justice organization whose ethos is not well understood by the broader public. In pursuing this project we will generate a set of design choices that center and serve

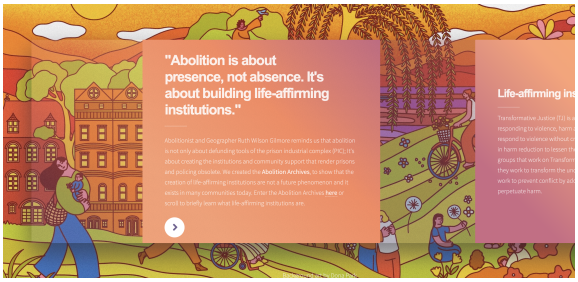

Fig. 2. Screenshot from first website prototype created during Feminist Futures Hackathon. This quote from Ruth Wilson Gilmore highlights the ethos of Abolition

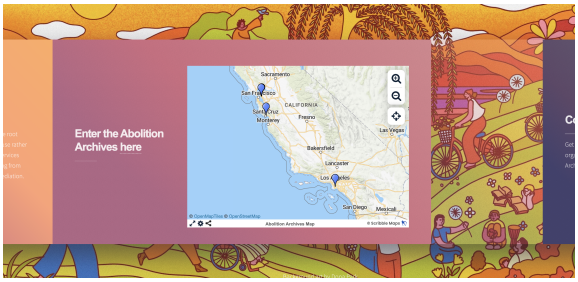

Fig. 3. Screenshot from first website prototype created during Feminist Futures Hackathon. This shows a map of abolitionist organizations in California

social justice organizations, thus advancing considerations for what it means to attain justice through research and prompting discussion regarding the ethical guidelines of designing for social justice organizations.

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