Unpacking feminist understandings of abolitionism in responding to gender-based violence: Theoretical insights towards a new framework

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Abstract

In the aftermath of austerity measures and in the wake of a right-wing populist wave across the globe, the growing inequalities and diminishing rights endured by women and queer people call for a closer investigation of gender and gender-based violence. The spatial articulation of cities as a materialization of hetero-patriarchal power relations has become an essential place for the struggle against gender-based violence. It, thus, becomes crucial to investigate the challenge posed by feminist groups against these structures by unravelling power structures in public space and shaping solutions to gender-based violence. One crucial yet overlooked aspect is the development of transformative justice perspectives within feminist struggles to create inclusive and non-violent public spaces. Originating from prison abolitionist movements, this concept develops a community-based approach to justice, understanding the role of structural oppressions in the enactment of violence. Lying at the intersection between feminist geography, abolitionist thought, and social movement studies, this article advances a theoretical contribution to the understanding of collective action. With a comprehensive literature review considering these three strands, this article further investigates the interplay between social movements and justice, arguing for the advantages of incorporating a transformative justice perspective when looking at feminist practices to challenge gender-based violence. The argument is strengthened by exemplary cases of feminist groups adopting abolitionist perspectives and transformative practices. This theoretical work explores the potential of transformative justice in envisioning radical societal changes, as well as showing how this perspective complements feminist visions and repertoires of action.

Introduction

On April 2, 2025, following the news of yet another two femicides of young women in their early twenties, a wave of protests swept through Italy, with transfeminist demonstrations being spontaneously organized in the main cities of the country (Il Post, 2025). Only some weeks before, on March 19, 2025, the Meloni far-right government had enacted a bill recognizing femicide as a crime (Ministero dell'Interno, 2025). During the mobilizations for the femicides, slogans along the lines of "We don't want life sentences, we want justice when we are alive" made explicit reference to the bill, showing the evaluation of this measure by some feminist groups. Addressing this matter, a well-known quote by Audre Lorde shows the position from which I look at the phenomenon of gender-based violence (GBV): "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). Lorde's reflection can be used to effectively illuminate how punitive approaches towards systemic injustice, such as GBV, will not target the root of the problem, as these same punitive measures are rooted in structural inequalities, entangled within sexism, racism, classism, and so on. The puzzle of this contribution, solidly entrenched in an abolitionist positioning, a radical project aiming to dismantle prisons and create the conditions for social justice (Davis et al., 2022), departs from this standpoint. Situating this work in the aftermath of austerity politics and in the wake of a right-wing populist wave (Mudde, 2019), the growing inequalities and diminishing rights experienced by women and queer people call for exploring gender and GBV. The spatial existence of cities as a materialization of hetero-patriarchal power relations has become an essential place for struggle in this regard. Many authors have shown how public space is conceived for a standard white, male, and able-bodied (Belingardi & Castelli, 2016; Kern, 2020; Young, 1990). In contrast, bodies different from this standard are systematically excluded from the public through systemic violence and through the very configuration of public space (Wilson, 1992). In this sense, the spatial exclusion of women and queers from the public domain - carried on and implemented over the centuries - have configured the dimension of the public as particularly challenging for the people different from those it was designed for (Warner, 2021; Wilson, 1992). This exclusion has been carried out through different devices, such as the configuration of space itself (Belingardi & Castelli, 2016; Borghi, 2012), the violent repression of these kinds of bodies (Warner, 2021), and the socially constructed dangers that women can face in

public (Kern, 2020). However, the public space has also played the role of a laboratory for the development of counterstrategies. Against this backdrop, it becomes relevant to investigate how feminist grassroots groups challenge these structures by unraveling power structures in public space and shaping solutions to GBV.

One crucial yet overlooked aspect is the deployment of transformative justice perspectives during feminist struggles to create inclusive and non-violent public spaces. Transformative justice, defined as an approach that places the responsibility of handling violence and harm on communities rather than on individuals (Kim, 2018), presents a fundamental collective dimension, which differentiates it from other forms of justice alternatives to the punitive system (Coker, 2002; Gready & Robins, 2014). This approach is grounded in an abolitionist perspective (Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018), as it is based on the idea that the carceral system carries colonial legacies (Gilmore, 2007) and is inevitably racialized and shaped by social class (Davis, 2003). In this sense, the development of alternatives to the punitive system has mostly emerged within racialized communities in the US (Davis, 2003; Kaba, 2021). In particular, the reflection on how to handle GBV within Black communities without resorting to the police has puzzled Black feminists for long (Davis et al., 2022; Incite!, 2007), also marking a divide with strands of white feminism that were seeing in the state intervention against GBV a solution (Kim, 2018). This reflection can be applied to the problem of GBV in public space, which, although presenting different challenges, can be tackled from a transformative, abolitionist perspective (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017). Delving into these different yet interconnected debates, this article aims to:

1) argue for the adoption of a feminist abolitionist standpoint in examining practices of transformative justice;

2) understand the role of transformative justice in social movements and the nexus between social movements and justice.

This contribution strives to provide theoretical lenses that can be used to understand the practices of transformative justice within feminist groups, thus contributing to advancing the understanding of collective action. To do so, it will be structured as follows. First, a comprehensive review of the three strands of literature on which this work is based will be provided, namely, feminist geography, abolitionism, and the nexus between social movements and justice, showing the connections between these strands and how this entanglement can represent a crucial lens to look at transformative justice practices. Then, a paragraph will discuss the relevance of a feminist abolitionist standpoint in addressing transformative justice. Due to the lack of empirical social movement scholarship addressing transformative justice within feminist groups, this section seeks to provide a relevant theoretical framework for this aim, fostering empirical research adopting this

framework. A second paragraph will tackle the role of transformative justice in relation to social movements, focusing on examples of feminist groups that address GBV in public space, thus providing a fitting example for the proposed framework, and examining further the nexus between social movements and justice.

Theoretical framework

Lying at the intersection between feminist geography, abolitionist critique, and social movement studies, the following literature review will encompass these three strands and will argue for the relevance of adopting an entanglement of these perspectives when looking at transformative practices in feminist groups addressing GBV in public space.

Feminist geography

The tradition of feminist geography has significantly contributed to unpacking the connection between gender and space (Duncan, 1996; Massey, 1994). Within this scholarship, considerable efforts have been devoted to examining how power is reproduced and materialized through space, in particular considering gender and sexuality as axes of oppression (Bell & Valentine, 2003). Adopting these axes as essential lenses to look at space and power, a privileged focus on urban space is fundamental to delve into the dynamics of exclusion. Indeed, cities have been historically understood as the civic space where public life unfolds, being tied to perceptions of universality and neutrality (Massey, 2007; Young, 1990). However, this perception is misleading, as many studies have shown how this supposed universal subject for whom public space is built almost always corresponds to a white, male, bourgeois, able-bodied, and heterosexual individual (Belingardi & Castelli, 2016; Borghi & Rondinone, 2009; Kern, 2020; Young, 1990). This configuration has contributed to the exclusion of women and queers from the public domain. Building on this assumption, three main and interconnected mechanisms of gendered repression in public space can be distinguished. First, as already mentioned, the structure of cities doesn't accommodate the needs of people who, for example, move more slowly, carry strollers, or use wheelchairs (Kern, 2020). Moreover, it systematically cancels the spatial existence of queer lives (Borghi, 2012). From this heteronormative and gendered spatial configuration follows the repression of subjectivities in public space deviating from the standard user of public space: women and queers face everyday harassment that contributes to the limitation of their freedom (Kern, 2020; Puwar, 2004). Adding to this is the repression of bodies seen as out of place, for example,

the bodies challenging the definition of the feminine subject to be protected. While the women to be protected in public space are constructed as white, heterosexual, and cisgender, subjectivities challenging the standards of whiteness, heterocisnormativity and supposed chastity, such as sex workers, racialized subjectivities, and queer people, are represented as dangerous "others" and, therefore, not only not protected, but also repressed (Pitch, 2011; 2013). Lastly, and connected to the previous dimension, is the imagined exclusion, by which I mean the socially constructed dangers that women can face in public, narrated in cultural terms as a threatening environment (Kern, 2020).

To explain the configuration of this gendered exclusion, it is necessary to delve into the origins of this separation, which is rooted in the culturally and socially constructed division between public and private. This gendered division of space consolidated along with the development of cities during the Industrial Revolution, when public space became associated with notions of danger and disorder, and, therefore, unsuitable for middle-class women (Wilson, 1992). The public-private division, gendered and sexualized, was rooted in a series of dichotomies, such as that between rationality and emotions, mind and body (Young, 1990). In this sense, the idea of the public as universal and rational contributed to the exclusion of the subjects conceived as opposite to this connotation, such as women and queers, related with the domain of the feelings, of sexuality, intimacy, and corporeity (Duncan, 1996; Warner, 2021; Young, 1990). This division fostered the relegation of women and queers to the private sphere and their traditional exclusion from the public domain of political action, even though private space has also represented an alternative political sphere for women (Bell & Valentine, 2003; Berlant & Warner, 1998; Duncan, 1996; Warner, 2021). Taking stock of this debate, the work of Young (1990) traces a connection between the public-private division and the discussion on social justice, contributing to linking this body of work with the scholarship on justice. In her work, the relegation of women to the private is explained by the configuration of the public domain as impartial and detached. These characteristics are also associated with the state, misleadingly depicted as the rightful custodian of collective justice.

However, the geographical literature revealing the connotations of the public sphere as socially constructed (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Duncan, 1996) proves useful to criticize this notion of impartiality, where the universal and rational subject conceals the white and male perspective (Young, 1990), resonating with Haraway's (1988) critique of scientific objectivity. In the interstices of this division, groups experiment with unexplored ways of mobilizing, such as in the example of the mothers of political prisoners or of victims of police abuse who politicize in public their supposedly private role of mothers (Gilmore, 2007).

In this sense, public space — although depending on context — represents the privileged space where social movements can challenge the systems of oppression (Duncan, 1996). Space represents a fundamental component of collective action, which needs to be considered when looking at the

characteristics of social movements, due to spatially influenced oppressions and possibilities of mobilization (Auyero, 2009; Nicholls, 2007). Thus, as public space can be a crucial dimension both for the deployment of GBV and for the strategies developed to counteract it by the feminist movements, I argue that a focus on public space is fundamental to consider the transformative practices experimented with to challenge GBV.

Abolitionism and transformative justice

Definition and origins of abolitionism

After having extensively discussed the role of feminist geography and the role of space regarding GBV, this paragraph moves on to discuss the approaches towards violence and crime, aiming to link the discussion on GBV in public space with the reflection on abolitionism and transformative approaches. To do so, it is fundamental to address the theories of abolitionism, unpacking the genesis of the abolitionist movement, its current legacies, the connections between the abolition of slavery and that of police and prisons, as well as the state of contemporary abolitionism. This section outlines this trajectory and connects the discourses on abolitionism with reflections on punishment, as well as linking it with considerations on transformative justice. To grasp what is meant by abolitionism, I refer to the understanding of Gilmore (2019, in Davis et al., 2022) of abolition as being "about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions" (Davis et al., 2022, p. 51). Similarly, Kaba (2021) claims that "PIC[1] abolition is a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to our personal and community safety" (p. 38). Having started with these definitions of abolitionism, it is useful to trace back the origins of this perspective in the literature and the collective understanding, as well as the related movement, rooted in the context of slavery in the US. Instances of abolitionist activities can be identified in the second half of the 18th century, for example, in the petitions issued by Black people as part of an anti-slavery effort (Aptheker, 1941). In its origin, the development of abolitionist ideas was entangled with religious and moralistic aspects (Matthews, 1967). In the first half of the 19th century, there was an increase in the activities of anti-slavery groups, leading up to the Civil War between 1861 and 1865 (Aptheker, 1941). The abolitionist movement per se began to exist starting from the 1830s, when new groups united with pre-existing anti-slavery groups. By then, anti-slavery journals and magazines started to be distributed, often

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[1] Prison-industrial complex. Defined by Kaba, a "racialized gendered classed heteronormative project" (Kaba & Duda, 2017 as in Barrie, 2020, p. 70).

supported by the subscriptions of Black people, which, together with the speeches of key figures in the movement, often racialized people, contributed to the diffusion of abolitionist sentiments.

In the last half of the 19th century, the work of Douglass contributed to illuminating the relation between being Black and being accused of crimes in the US, with whiteness being a resource to mobilize in this regard, making it easier not to be prosecuted (Davis, 2003). This dynamic lies in continuity with contemporary practices of racial profiling (p. 30). When considering the key junctures of abolitionism, Sojourner Truth's celebrated speech *Ain't I a woman?*, delivered at the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, represents a foundational moment in identifying the intersection of racial and gender oppression, showing how racialized women have historically been forbidden the social attributes associated with womanhood (Truth, 1851). Similarly, Du Bois (1935), using a Marxist lens, introduces race as a key element in understanding capitalist relations between labor and production. His work identifies the failure of the Reconstruction period after the American Civil War in the absence of an alliance between newly freed Black people and the poor white working class (Du Bois, 1935; Taylor, 2008). After defining the origins of the abolitionist movement, it is necessary to articulate the connection with the current understandings of abolitionism regarding prison and police. How does the institution of slavery connect with these latter?

Continuity between the abolition of slavery and the abolition of prison
The origin of police in the South of the US was inherently entangled with the institution of slavery and its maintenance, originating from slave patrols (Kaba, 2021). After the Civil War, the legacies of white supremacy persisted through instruments like lynching and segregation, despite the abolition of slavery (Davis, 2003). Just as these institutions were considered impossible to dismantle back then and are nowadays seen as appalling, the fact that it seems today unimaginable to think of the abolition of prisons, it does not mean that it cannot be done (Davis, 2003, p. 24). Between the 18th and the 19th century, when the penitentiary started to be established in Europe, in the US and in territories colonized by Western forces, it marked a radical shift in the understanding of punishment, shifting from a corporal sanction to the segregation from the world (Davis, 2003; Foucault, 1977). Many are the similarities between the institution of prison and that of slavery in the US, with race being a key aspect (Davis, 2003; Davis et al., 2022). Going beyond a mere parallel between the system of slavery and that of prison in the US, scholars have identified a "genealogical connection between the two institutions" (Davis et al., 2022, p. 53). To circumvent the abolition of slavery, in the aftermath of the American Civil War, Southern states developed a legal system aiming at limiting the freedom of the recently freed slaves, fostered through the phrasing of the 13th Amendment (Davis, 2003). Even though the Amendment abolished slavery, it allowed the

existence of forced labor as a penalty for those convicted of crimes, a condition that was made extremely more likely for African Americans (Davis, 2003; 2011). Thus, the institution of slavery was directly translated into that of convict labor, on which the industrialization of the Southern states massively relied (Davis, 2003; 2011; Davis et al., 2022; Du Bois, 1935). Building on the abolitionist movement reconstruction by Davis et al. (2022), the movement gained momentum between the sixties and the seventies, through the mobilization in favor of the civil rights movement political prisoners, among whom was Davis herself. Following the Attica prison uprising in 1971, one of the most important and deadly prison riots, several abolitionist groups, books, and projects started to spring up in the seventies.

In 1998, the conference "Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex", organized at the University of California, represented a key moment for delineating the characteristics of the current abolitionist and anti-prison movement. Critical Resistance, a formal organization since 2001, fostered an understanding of police and prison as entrenched in capitalism and perpetuating racism, developing the concept of the prison industrial complex "to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" (Critical Resistance, n.d., Davis et al., 2022, p. 43). This lens is significant to understand the current dynamic of mass incarceration in the US and elsewhere, as public funds are paid to private companies that own prisons and immigrant detention centers (Davis, 2003; Davis et al., 2022). While we might perceive the mass incarceration condition as difficult to change, Kaba (2021) urges us to remember that it was not until the 1980s that it was established, to compensate for the losses of deindustrialization and to restrain social movements.

Gendering abolitionism

Even though the number of women in prison is smaller than that of men, gender is a fundamental lens to look at the carceral system (Davis, 2003), and, therefore, also a key dimension of abolitionism. Indeed, GBV is a common feature of women's experience in detention (Barrie, 2020; Davis, 2003). To provide a common example, sexual assault by officers and strip searches are routine and institutionalized practices of GBV (Davis, 2011; Davis et al., 2022) and can be positioned in connection with the sexual abuses endured by Black women during slavery (Davis, 2003). Moreover, a continuity can be identified between institutional physical punishment and intimate partner violence, as a control on gendered bodies legitimized by social institutions. While we might think of male deviance as normal, female criminality is constructed as much more unnatural, as breaking the law strays even further from the socially imposed tenets of femininity. In this sense, it is important to notice that even though women are less frequently incarcerated, alternative and gendered forms of detention exist. Indeed, psychiatric facilities have historically been the place

where women were confined, constructing feminine criminality as insanity rather than deviancy, but with racial distinctions. Indeed, while white women were destined to alternative correction facilities, racialized women were often denied this gendered treatment, as their womanhood was conceived as less so. Davis remarkably disentangles the bond between crime, sexual abuse, gender, and race: "The notion that female 'deviance' always has a sexual dimension persists in the contemporary era, and this intersection of criminality and sexuality continues to be racialized" (Davis, 2003, p. 68).

A further entanglement of gender and prison — more specifically, abolitionism — emerges in the statement by Critical Resistance and Incite! (2003) advocating for the development of strategies tackling violence against women. The separation between anti-prison activism and anti-GBV groups has contributed to the exclusion of racialized women and queers, massively enduring institutional and gendered violence. Thus, it is crucial to design responses that address these two systems contemporarily, to tackle GBV without relying on carceral justice. The statement further explains the intersection of state and GBV, for example when migrant women are deported upon denouncing GBV, the conviction of survivors who kill their abusers, such as in the case of Joan Little (Davis et al., 2022), cutting funds for social welfare and shelters to fund police, the GBV experienced by women in prison (Critical Resistance & Incite!, 2003). Being aware that the abolitionist alternatives to prison developed have not proved suitable for managing GBV situations, requiring an unrealistic idea of community, Critical Resistance and Incite! (2003) urge to develop "transformative practices emerging from local communities", "to promote collective responses to violence" (p. 144) and to "challenge men of color and all men in social justice movements to take particular responsibility to address and organize around gender violence in their communities as a primary strategy for addressing violence and colonialism" (p. 144). In this sense, by outlining the nexus between abolitionism and GBV from an intersectional lens, I argue for the relevance of adopting this lens when considering feminist practices to challenge GBV. To this aim, the link between abolitionism and transformative justice is a further, necessary step.

The connection between abolitionism and transformative justice

The criminal justice system — often unable to handle crime and ending up with reproducing harm — can represent a way to repress and control marginalized social groups, as well as maintain the status quo by hiding inequalities (Davis, 2016; Kim, 2018; Moore & Roberts, 2016). Moving away from it, Moore and Roberts (2016, p. 130) argue that "a focus on transformative solutions builds on the abolitionist tradition and attempts to address the weaknesses of many apparently progressive 'alternatives to criminal justice'". Accordingly, "transformative justice is about trying to figure out how we respond to violence and harm in a way that doesn't cause more violence and harm"

(Kaba, 2021, p. 234). The critical focus of this approach is on communities: both as contexts to transform — as their features made violence possible — and as the means through which transformation can be achieved (Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018). This collective dimension of transformative justice marks a difference with reparative approaches, which prioritize individual processes of justice, without a strong focus on the community and the impact of systemic inequalities on the perpetuation of violence (Coker, 2002; Gready & Robins, 2014). Moreover, transformative approaches acknowledge the entanglement of criminalization and institutional violence in a context where Black and poor people are disproportionately convicted (Kim, 2018), as well as showing how incarcerating some abusers will not solve a socially diffused problem (Kaba, 2021). Several features characterize transformative approaches, such as believing and supporting the survivor, focusing on their needs, aiming to change the social features that made the violence possible and to prevent that violence from occurring again, and, lastly, privileging accountability and recovery over punishment, creating justice in a context-dependent way based on the survivor's requests. Moreover, this approach deeply advocates for nuanced understandings of violence, acknowledging that the same person can do harm, as well as experiencing or having experienced violence themself. All these characteristics point to a practice that unfolds as "a collective project decided together in community" to create better societies (p. 119).

Transformative justice is intertwined within Black communities and Black feminist organizing in the US, since these groups are targeted with massive criminalization and police brutality (Kim, 2018; 2021). Linking this approach to the feminist geography debate can be particularly fruitful. Even though transformative justice has mostly been applied to domestic GBV, it could prove a useful tool also to address everyday instances of GBV in public (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017). In this sense, I contend that connecting these two debates is relevant to looking at the practices developed by feminist movements to address GBV in public space. This connection, engaging with feminist abolitionist strategies to counter GBV, calls for a broader engagement with the debate discussing social movements and justice.

Social movements and justice

Having outlined the genealogy of abolitionism and its connection with transformative justice, in this section, I propose to link this topic with the broader debate existing in the social movement literature on the relation between social movements and justice. Establishing a link between these two strands allows to connect the debate on abolitionism and transformative justice with the broader understandings of justice developed within social movements. The relation between social movements and justice has been researched in social movement scholarship along three main lines of research — i.e., frames, actions, and repression. Frames — defined as cognitive schemas to

interpret reality (Goffman, 1974) — are a key component of social movement processes and a crucial entry point to examine their symbolic and cultural production. Collective action frames are defined as "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimize the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). The motivational framing, namely the set of reasons that convince people to mobilize, is often entrenched in moral understandings of what is seen to be just (Snow & Benford, 1988). Among collective action frames, the perception of injustice in society is a fundamental driver of collective action (Gamson et al., 1982). Defined as "the righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul" (Gamson, 2013, p. 319), injustice attributes to specific actors or situations the cause of inequalities. Polletta's (1998) work on narratives within social movements' identity construction fruitfully expands framing theory. By doing so, her work illuminates further the connection between social movements and the understanding of justice, bringing in a more nuanced picture of how movements construct their relation to justice as a final aim. Indeed, her understanding of narratives as "chronicles invested with moral meanings" (Polletta, 1998, p. 140; White, 1980) helps to examine the future as connected to the moral aim and the identity-building of a movement (Polletta, 1998).

Unlike framing theory, where the injustice against which to fight must be presented precisely (Polletta, 1998; Snow & Benford, 1988), according to narrative approaches, "we struggle because the story's end is consequential — not only as the outcome but as the moral of the events which precede it" (Polletta, 1998, p. 141). Thus, the connection between the understanding of injustice and the motivation to act is more nuanced and, in the case examined by Polletta, is narrated as "an imperative over which individuals had no control" (p. 150). When put in relation to the dimension of action, justice is seen as the final aim guiding collective action, and different understandings of justice shape identity-related movements' agendas (Kurtz, 2002).

Similarly, for Fuentes and Frank (1989), the sense of injustice is the main driver of social movements' mobilization "precisely from the moral force of their promise to free their participants from the deeply felt, unjust (threat of) deprivation of material necessities, social status, and cultural identity" (p. 187). This sense of injustice concerns the group that constitutes a specific movement. In their work, injustice is presented as a structural condition, especially connected to economic crises and lack of institutional support, with a specific attention toward the so-called Global South[2], and social justice is sought on a local, self-organized basis.

Focusing on the experiences of the so-called Global South, de Sousa Santos (2015) uncovers another fundamental dimension of justice — epistemic justice — arguing that "there is no global justice without global cognitive justice" (p. viii). Among different kinds of injustices, de Sousa

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[2] For a critique of the use of the term 'Global South' see Teixeira da Silva (2021).

Santos identifies the "cognitive injustice committed against the wisdom of the world" (p. 15), uncovering the devaluation of epistemologies that belong to knowledge systems outside of the Western-centric tradition. At the intersection of critical theory and political philosophy, the seminal work by Young (1990) offers further significant reflections on the topic of justice. Critiquing theories of distributive justice, Young advocates for moving beyond this understanding of justice, even when distribution is applied to non-material aspects. Rather, she contends that focusing on structures of oppression and domination and on processes of political participation is fundamental for addressing social justice. In this sense, social justice is defined as "the degree to which a society contains and supports the institutional conditions necessary for the realization of these values" [the values of the good life] (Young, 1990, p. 37). The actions of the new social movements aim to challenge domination and oppression as structural injustices by pursuing social justice.

Moving toward the field of social psychology, the key work by Tyler and Smith (1995) connects theories of social justice with scholarship on social movement behavior. They advocate for the importance of social justice research, whose findings challenge models based on self-interest, covering scholarship on the different responses to injustice, developed at either the individual or collective level. The perception of injustice as affecting a group can function as a trigger for mobilization for collective action (Gurr, 1970; Tyler & Smith, 1995). Examining the literature on the responses to the perception of injustice, they distinguish between responses that fall within the norms of a certain society and responses outside of the norms; responses addressing an individual responsible and responses tackling a broader system seen as unjust; and lastly, responses aiming to improve individual conditions and those seeking to address collective needs (Tyler & Smith, 1995, p. 31). Collective action can address injustice by using tools that conform to the system rules, by disrupting the system itself, or by escaping the social system. Anticipating the arguments advocating for transformative justice, they show that, even though, within a retributive justice standpoint, punishment is often framed as a tool for restoring justice by aiming to prevent future offenses and promote re-education, punishment often fails to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. These findings can be linked to arguments advocating for transformative justice. As a last dimension, social movements encounter justice in the sense of the judicial system when they face repression for their actions (Earl, 2003) or when they resort to litigation to achieve change (McCammon & McGrath, 2015).

Interestingly, the topic of space plays a significant role in the entanglement of social movements and justice. Indeed, in the work by Miller and Nicholls (2013), this link is explored by using space as a fundamental lens. Going beyond the idea that urban social movements are only concerned with issues related to the place they are based in, they show how urban social movements can develop claims that go beyond the local dimension, tackling global systemic inequalities to achieve social justice. The injustices experienced in the cities can be reconnected to a global system, due

to the widespread diffusion of urban settings around the world (Lefebvre, 2003; Miller & Nicholls, 2013). In this sense, urbanization is profoundly intertwined with the injustices developed within global capitalism (Harvey, 1982). While cities are often a site of institutionalized injustices, they can also provide the resources necessary for mobilization, due to the possibility of creating a dense network of relations (Miller & Nicholls, 2013). Within these networks, specific discourses are developed, challenging systemic inequalities and fostering justice-oriented values connected on a global level. The discussion on justice, linked to the topic of social movements and space, is a cornerstone lens to tackle the topic of this work. I contend that using this conceptual framework engaging with justice allows to fruitfully examine the understanding and practices of abolitionism and transformative justice within the actions of feminist groups challenging GBV. Linking the debate on justice with the scholarship on social movement and space, it is possible to examine the actions of feminist groups to tackle GBV in public space, considered as a systemic form of injustice on a global level.

Discussion

Abolitionist feminism

After having proposed hybridizing three different strands of literature to construct a compelling conceptual framework to consider feminist actions to address GBV in public space, I contend that adopting a feminist abolitionist standpoint is crucial to examine feminist practices of transformative justice, as this perspective effectively aligns with feminist perspectives towards GBV in public. Describing the origins of the word 'abolitionism', Davis et al. (2022) seek to explain the relation between slavery and prison. The "genealogical connection" (p. 53) between slavery and prison can be useful to understand the nexus between feminism and abolitionism. Indeed, when feminism originated, women used to equate their condition of oppression to slavery (p. 54). Another compelling analogy that allows to understand the convergence between abolitionism and feminism is the understanding of institutional violence in prison, such as police abuse, as following the same logic and steps of intimate partner violence, as understood by Monica Cosby and the organization Sisters Inside, thus demonstrating the relatedness of these two traditions (pp. 112–113). According to Bierria et al. (2022), the notion of 'feminist abolition' as encompassing these two strands was first used by Davis during a lecture at the University of Chicago (Davis, 2013). Davis et al.'s (2022) work itself reveals the genealogy of the entanglement between feminism and abolitionism, showing how already in the 1800s there were "attempts by abolitionists to link

antislavery strategies to women's suffrage and other feminist projects" (p. 97). Starting from the end of the 19th century, Black and indigenous feminist intellectuals have developed reflections on the interconnection between GBV and the racist-capitalist system, by showing the institutional nature of the use of GBV in the contexts of slavery and colonialism (Barrie, 2020; Davis et al., 2022). In line with a similar reasoning, in addition to the oppression of women, the repression of queer existences was a crucial dimension of colonial practices in the lands of Abya Yala (Mogul et al., 2011, as in Bierria et al., 2022). The entanglement that I have aimed to reconstruct has become even more glaring in the past decade, as the revamp of a new feminist wave has woven its struggles with those of anti-racist and abolitionist movements, with which a convergence was established (Bierria et al., 2022).

The 2020 statement *The Moment of Truth* on the failures of the mainstream feminist approach to GBV, written by several anti-violence groups in the US, further signaled this dynamic, by claiming the impossibility of pursuing feminist goals without acknowledging the entanglement of feminism with abolitionism and racial justice (Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020; Davis et al., 2022). Along these lines, I argue that using feminist abolitionism as a framework to address feminist strategies against GBV allows for an intersectional understanding of violence and punishment. Bierria et al. (2022) ultimately provide a significant reflection explaining the inextricable entanglement between abolitionism and feminism:

> As feminist scholars and activists, we find abolition to be foundationally feminist, as it calls for the recognition and conscious enactment of the entwined personal and political. After all, what is more feminist than the everyday practice of willing an impossible future while resisting the deadly chaos of the present? (p. 12).

Carceral feminism

While abolitionist feminism traces a continuity between GBV and institutional violence (Critical Resistance and Incite!, 2001), so-called carceral feminism entails relying on the criminal justice system to address GBV (Bernstein, 2007; Kim, 2018; Moore & Roberts, 2016; Terwiel, 2020; Taylor, 2018). The term, first coined by Bernstein (2007) to describe tough-on-crime anti-sex work feminists, has broadened its original meaning, by encompassing state-based solutions to GBV. Kim (2018) reconstructs the origins of this debate in the US by showing the dynamic of institutionalization of the anti-violence movement. When the US anti-violence movement started from other leftist movements in the sixties, it was part of a politicized and feminist enterprise. However, alongside the seventies neoliberal turn and the heightened focus on the criminal system in the US, leveraging criminalization was deemed a successful strategy to secure attention and funds for the issue of GBV (Heiner & Tyson, 2017; Kim, 2018). Within this context, two strategies

to address GBV are identified, Gender-Responsive Justice (GRJ) and Community Accountability (CA), both originated in the nineties (Heiner & Tyson, 2017). While the first, rooted in a white and professionalized background, relies on an essentializing notion of gender and takes its steps from criminology, the second encompasses a systemic and intersectional understanding of violence and oppression, and is mainly developed by grassroots groups and practitioners. More generally, it can be observed that, due to the US development of the anti-violence movement, the struggle against GBV became entangled with institutions and criminalization, leading to grassroots groups being co-opted by the state. Within this dynamic, endemic GBV has been used to harshen punishments towards more marginalized strata of society (Grzyb, 2021; Kim, 2021; Terwiel, 2020).

Having outlined this picture, it can prove significant to go beyond a dichotomic distinction between carceral feminist and non-carceral feminism, shifting the focus from the engagement with the state and the criminal system in a binary way to, rather, looking at how these different approaches engage with the state (Terwiel, 2020). Terwiel further argues that a binary understanding of this matter could be useless and that it would be more relevant to look at decarceration as a "spectrum" (p. 423). Moreover, tracing back the cleavage between carceral and anti-carceral feminisms to the sex war debate, she shows that the issue at stake could not even be different approaches towards GBV, but rather the very definition of GBV itself. Differently, Musto (2019) understands the project of intersectional feminism and transformative justice as totally incompatible with any reliance on justice from the state institutions, as inherently classed and racialized. Ultimately, Terwiel (2020, p. 424) argues that "the feminist abolitionist critique of carceral feminism has important strengths. It brings together the harms of mass incarceration and sexual violence at a moment when both are seen as urgent, but too often as separate, social justice issues". In this sense, the debate on carceral feminism is inextricably linked to intersectional understandings of prison and feminism. While having reconstructed the debate on carceral and anti-carceral feminism and the differences between these two perspectives, I argue that building on Terwiel's concept of a "spectrum of decarceration" (p. 423) is essential to look at transformative and abolitionist practices against GBV developed by feminist groups, avoiding getting caught in rigid and binary understandings of justice practices.

Transformative justice and social movements

Having proposed a conceptual framework to look at feminist practices developed against GBV, in this section, I engage with the role of transformative justice and how it is adopted within social movements, providing examples of feminist experiments addressing GBV in public from an abolitionist position. The discussion of these cases contributes to strengthening the relevance of the proposed framework. Focusing on intersectional abolitionist feminist projects, Musto (2019) shows how they work with abolitionist and transformative justice practices, "by bringing penal abolitionists together with activists working on allied social movements to address state violence" (p. 49). Reconstructing the stories of these projects and diving into their understandings of social justice allows us to explore the nexus between social movements and justice, by looking at the development of abolitionist stances in terms of 'frame bridging' (Benford & Snow, 2000) between groups, namely "the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem." (p. 624). According to Lober's (2022, p. 82) review of Thuma's *All Our Trials*, "reproductive, connective, and affective labor of women—both incarcerated and outside—" is "the fabric of abolitionist efforts". In Thuma's reconstruction, through the seventies and the eighties in the US, there have been several actions organized by feminist anti-carceral groups, leading up to the Incite! conference The Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color (Davis et al., 2022; Lober, 2022). This conference marked the birth of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, a "movement of many movements" committed to "feminist struggles for prison abolition and anti-imperialist feminisms" (Bierria et al., 2022, p. 23; Davis et al., 2022). Incite!'s analysis of GBV encompasses US colonialism and imperialism as integral parts of the heteropatriarchal system, while seeing the US prison-industrial complex in continuity with the violent US war campaigns abroad, as well as with slavery and anti-immigration politics (Bierria et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2022). Since then, local chapters have sprung up all around the US aiming to tackle violence against racialized women, while adopting a systemic understanding of structural inequalities (Critical Resistance & Incite!, 2001; Terwiel, 2020), among which the support to Palestinian women against Israeli violence have held a significant role (Bierria et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2022). Given the porous nature of Incite!, the movement combined efforts with several other groups, such as the New York-based Sista II Sista organization in 2001, and, in 2002, Latinos Contra la Guerra, a project aimed to struggle against the US colonial politics in Latina America, as well as Critical Resistance (Bierria et al., 2011; Bierria et al., 2022; Critical Resistance & Incite!, 2001; Davis et al., 2022), envisioning "powerful collective re-imagination and reconstruction of community and liberatory community-engaged practice with an explicit mandate to interrupt and transform intimate, community, and state violence" (Bierria et al., 2011, p. 9).

Many other abolitionist groups committed to transformative practices to end GBV have emerged, mainly in the US context. Among many there are CARA (Communities Against Rape and Abuse), a group working towards survivors empowering and community accountability enhancement inside and outside the institutional framework (Heiner & Tyson, 2017; Palomba, 2023; Terwiel, 2020); Creative Interventions, that developed a toolkit to provide communities with resources to practice transformative justice (Heiner & Tyson, 2017; Palomba, 2023); Generation FIVE, a group working to end child sexual abuse in a community- and survivor-centered way (Taylor, 2018); Philly Stands Up, a collective committed to transform GBV within the anarchist punk community of Philadelphia (Barrie, 2020; Bierria et al., 2011; Palomba, 2023), and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, developing the concept of 'pods' to materialize better the concept of community (Brazzell & Meiners, 2022; Palomba, 2023). Moreover, other feminist abolitionist groups adopting transformative practices can be found in the UK, such as Sisters Uncut (Davis et al., 2022; Palomba, 2023), in Australia, like Sisters Inside (Davis et al., 2022), in Mexico, like Actos Transformadores, in Germany, like the Transformative justice Kollektiv and LesMigraS (Brazzell & Meiners, 2022).

Interestingly, other groups working with transformative justice are committed to creating the conditions to collectively handle situations of everyday GBV in public space without necessarily resorting to the police, such as the Good Night Out campaign, working to train the staff of public events to have the tools to handle GBV in a transformative way, supporting the survivor and creating the conditions for the abuser to understand the harm (Palomba, 2023). In this sense, tracing a connection with the everyday GBV experienced in public space is particularly important, given that "the continuum of violence, therefore, is expressed in the everyday violence that women experience in their homes, on the streets, and in the public sphere" (Boesten & Wilding, 2015, p. 2). Indeed, while most work on transformative justice engages with domestic GBV, "there is great potential for transformative justice as a frame to address 'everyday' manifestations of sexual violence" (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017, p. 208), meaning the daily GBV experienced in public space. The case of the Spanish *punt lila* effectively exemplifies this dynamic by transposing elements of transformative justice and abolition to the realm of GBV in public space (Palomba, 2023), thus providing an example for the theoretical hybridization proposed. Following the reconstruction of author and facilitator Giusi Palomba, the *punt lila* are a device experimented with in several Catalan cities, consisting of a recognizable stall in public space, especially in the context of big public events such as gigs. In the *punt lila*, trained staff are available to intervene in case of harassment through a survivor-centered approach (p. 117). Two pathways are designed for this aim: one entails the presence of a stall with trained staff during public events, the other includes a more structured training of public and private actors (such as shop owners and staff in a neighborhood) to establish an alliance to foster awareness raising and intervention in front of GBV (Diputació de Barcelona, n.d.).

The *punt lila* were first established in the Barcelona neighborhood of Poble-sec, implemented by different feminist groups from the area (Cifuentes Fontanals & Montes Lara, 2019). This practice then spread to the rest of the city, being incorporated within the set of practices of different groups and associations, thus implementing further awareness within the groups themselves. This tool is used in many places in Spain, especially in the context of nightlife, and, in the recount of an activist, the established steps always involve first the survivor's support and acting according to their needs and decisions (Martínez, 2017). While the tool of the *punt lila* cannot be considered a fully-fledged deployment of a transformative justice process, there are transformative elements inherent to this practice, such as the centering on the survivor's needs, entailing that no actions are undertaken without the survivor's consent, like involving the police or banishing the person who committed the violence. I argue that this understanding, aligning with Terwiel's (2020) "spectrum of decarceration" (p. 423), allows to look at feminist practices on a spectrum towards abolitionism rather than distinguishing them through exclusive categories.

Conclusions

This review has sought to bridge different bodies of literature, such as feminist geography, abolitionism, and the debate on social movements and justice, by weaving connections between these strands of scholarship and proposing this combination as a compelling lens to look at transformative justice practices. First, by building on these debates, I have argued for the significance of a feminist abolitionist approach as a compass when addressing the reflection on transformative justice. As Meenakshi Mannoe argues:

> *I do see terms like transformative justice and mutual aid being taken up more quickly than prison abolition, and I wonder why. I don't see a hierarchy between any of these approaches to justice and dignity, but the persistent fear of talking about criminals (and in turn, criminalized people) does give me pause* (Brazzell & Meiners, 2022, p. 252).

It emerges that, while a hierarchy between these approaches is pointless, it is necessary to outline the development of transformative justice as solidly entrenched in an abolitionist tradition (Mingus, 2018). Concerning the latter, a feminist lens is extremely compelling and historically relevant (Barrie, 2020; Bierria et al., 2022). Secondly, through this review, I have sought to give an overview of the role of transformative justice perspectives within social movements concerned with abolitionism and GBV. The prolific work of these groups, networks, and practitioners allows

to explore the relation between social movements and justice by looking at abolitionist stances as a bridging frame between groups. Lastly, through the provided example of feminist groups engaging with GBV in public space through an abolitionist perspective, such as the experience of the *punt lila* (Palomba, 2023), I have shown the relevance of adopting a theoretical framework intertwining feminist geography, abolitionism, and reflections on justice, further strengthening the connection between feminist repertoires of action and understandings of justice on a theoretical level.

Thus, through this review, I have suggested a way forward for the investigation of GBV in public space and the practices of feminist movements, by using the lens of transformative justice and abolitionism to disentangle justice from punishment and crime. Future research might address this puzzle empirically by conducting investigations in local contexts of feminist groups. In this sense, diverse methodological tools can prove relevant to deepen the understanding of this issue. This paper, having outlined a theoretical framework for looking at GBV from a transformative perspective, aims to foster empirical scholarship employing the suggested theoretical approach.

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