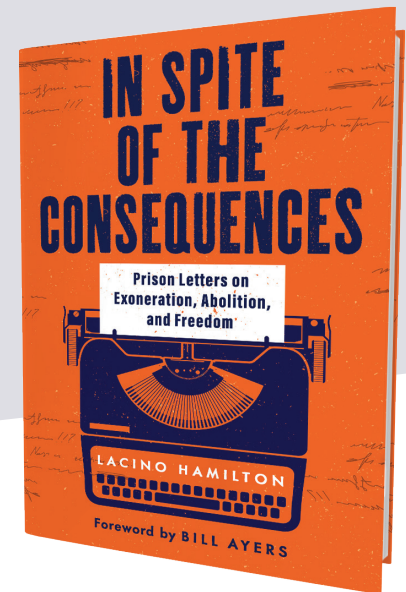


In Spite of the Consequences:
Prison Letters on Exoneration, Abolition, and Freedom
BY LACINO HAMILTON

DISCUSSION GUIDE



ABOLITION AND REFORM

1. Throughout his letters, Lacino Hamilton makes a case against reform, in favor of abolition. What does he cite as his reasoning behind abolishing prisons? What are your views on reforming the system vs. abolishing it as a whole?
2. Hamilton's case for prison abolition stands alongside other causes for abolition, such as "defund the police" or "abolish the police." How do you see his views in conversation with similar ideas?
3. How has society (politicians, the public, media) tried to focus on reforming people instead of reforming social systems such as prisons? What does Hamilton cite as the flaw in this reasoning?
4. How do you think we can challenge America's reliance on the prison system?

PRISON AS A SYSTEM

1. What methods does Hamilton describe being used to remove personhood and to break prisoners' resistance to the system?
2. Hamilton writes, "The prisoner social system . . . permits me to reject my captors rather than reject myself (i.e., act out the role of the perfect inmate). The perfect inmate is a shell of him or herself." What reasons does Hamilton offer for his resistance in response to those who want him to quit resisting the system? How does he rebel against being the "perfect inmate," and why?
3. Neocolonialism is defined as "the subtle propagation of socioeconomic and political activity by former colonial rulers aimed at reinforcing capitalism, neoliberal globalization, and cultural subjugation of their former colonies." In his letters, Hamilton uses the term "domestic neocolonialism." What does he mean by this? How do prison facilitators participate in this system?

ANGER

1. In his fervent responses to letters from his parents, Hamilton makes a case for his own anger. We sense his parents' admonitions to "be good," but instead Hamilton channels his critiques and frustrations into his work, for which he receives retaliation from guards and prison officials. Why is society so uncomfortable with anger (particularly anger lobbied against unjust systems)?
2. Hamilton compels us to reconsider our views on punishment, on a system that throws people away, breaks their spirits, and removes them from our conscience: "There is no crime I could ever commit in pursuit of my freedom as great as the crime committed by those who deny my freedom." What does this system tell you about how we view punishment in this country?

INNOCENCE

1. What are the catch-22s that Hamilton points out about being innocent in an insane system?
2. Hamilton writes that “the network of innocence clinics should think about what they ask men and women they work to exonerate. Why should I have to smile my way through abuse?” Why do we enforce respectability politics on even those who have been most harmed by the system?
3. How can we, as foreword writer Bill Ayers suggests, support movements like the Innocence Project while also maintaining that “people who commit crimes—even terrible acts—are still human beings worthy of love and life”?

EDUCATION

1. Hamilton writes that “oppression + education = resistance” and that “there are groups in society that do not want us leaving prison with the quality of education that facilitates the type of insights and understanding of our predicament that might inconvenience or challenge those with privilege, wealth, and power.” How do these insights influence your views on making higher education more accessible to those who are incarcerated?
2. What factors does Hamilton describe in his letters that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline?
3. Hamilton writes, “We must challenge those who blame children caught in the school-to-prison pipeline for their own miseducation.” How does his own story challenge this narrative?

WRITING

1. Hamilton describes how he educated himself on how to write well while he was in prison. He ultimately saw writing as the vehicle for his protest and as a way to get others to listen. What do you view as the pros and cons of this form of writing?
2. Writing offered the “right to dignity, self-expression, and opportunities for creativity” for Hamilton. Can you think of other rebellious writers whose words carry the strength of hope and dignity? Have any been influential to you and your thinking?
3. Hamilton’s letters range from the theoretical to the deeply personal. Which letters have stuck with you the most? Why?