

INTRODUCTION FROM THE ISSUE EDITORS

An Anti-Colonial Approach to Abolition: Building Intentional Relations

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We acknowledge the territories and traditional custodians of these lands. We acknowledge their wisdom and knowledge as a vital resource and energy not only for this work, but for this world, for who we are, for how we raise our children, and for how they raise us. Thank you to the authors, readers, and journal editors for your spirit and energy.

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INTRODUCTION

As invited editors for this special issue on “Anti-Colonial Approach to Abolition” in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP), we are each coming from different directions of the wind but all from settler countries in the lands known as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. While we honour and value our connections, the forces that brought us together were the parallels in our anti-colonial work and struggles against carceral systems in our respective countries that are clearly identified and articulated by every author that contributed to this collection. These parallels are no accident. Anti-colonial struggles are rooted against the prison and in a long-standing tradition of modern colonialism whereby the colonizers stay (Wolfe, 2006). In this issue, we all come together in an anti-colonial intervention to expose colonial logics and violence, and offer possibilities outside of colonial systems like the prison in the wake of its patterned forces. The simple act of building these intentional relations is an important undertaking against a seemingly monolith that seeks to destroy them.

A part of building intentional relations is prioritizing people and connections. In this issue, we chose to first introduce the authors at the beginning of each article who generously share their life-worlds and lifeways with us. We do this to situate ourselves in relation to this world and our work, and to place the person before their words. Many of the authors of this issue have been subject to prison. Most are Indigenous to these colonized lands and are alive to the multiplicity of every day carceral-colonial experiences, pushing back with strength of culture, country, and community. Often, in the work and practice of the carceral, we place much of our energy in systems. Consistent with the anti-colonial theme of this special issue, and as the authors eloquently remind us in so many colourful ways, our collective work centres people and communities.

There is no one definition or way to understand anti-colonial abolitionism; it is as fluid as a river that winds its way through the lands, nourishing many life worlds along its way. In its essence, anti-colonial abolitionism seeks to unravel colonial logics from its interlocking structures of patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism to which criminalizing and carceral systems of justice are located. The prison is one apparatus that removes people from their lands, culture, communities, supports, families, and homes – and exists within a broader carceral archipelago of the colonial

state. From a trajectory of reserves, slavery, residential schools, child apprehensions, inner city poverty traps, youth detention and prisons among many others, the carceral continues to segregate, assimilate, and sever vital life supports and relations. As the articles in this special edition of the *JPP* reveal, anti-colonial abolitionism resists all these institutions and highlights the powerful role of self-determination and sovereignty in caring for and allowing communities to flourish.

The colonial relationship has not ended; and it is from this introduction that we prioritize an anti-colonial abolitionism to capture the colonial hauntings that underpin carceral spaces. Today, colonialism is more commonly projected as something of the past whereby the ongoing colonial violence within carceral spaces and practices is frequently ignored, minimized, or trivialized. These erasures give the appearance that what exists today for Indigenous and other colonized people is necessary, normal, or natural, and that the hardships and struggles experienced today are only a symptom of “historical wrongs” and of a carceral modernity from which colonized people ostensibly cannot “keep up with” (Tuck & Yang, 2012), along with other colonial fictions and fantasies.

The structural and systemic manner by which Indigenous people continue to be colonized are rarely explored or linked to the denaturalized carceral operations. As Viviane Saleh-Hannah (2015) notes, “crimes of enslavement within plantations, chain gangs, reservations and penitentiaries are shielded from moral interrogation while processes of confinement (whom, how and for how long) conveniently take precedence”. Mariame Kaba (2021, p. 110) adds that Indigenous law and justice processes were deemed “insufficiently punitive, and therefore uncivilized” by colonizers to override their legitimacy and usher in mass incarceration. This special issue is a part of conversations that Indigenous, along with so many other racialized and colonized peoples, have articulated and understood most of their lives. They are threaded through the authors’ contributions to this collection, which cannot be summarized in this introduction but must be read in full to encapsulate their richness.

Anti-colonial abolitionism not only seeks to detract or dismantle the structures and logics that continue to be reproduced throughout carceral and “criminal” justice arrangements, but to also build and reclaim more supportive and collective approaches to holding each other accountable and keeping each other safe (Blagg & Anthony, 2014). Contrary to its nomenclature, abolition

itself is not just the tearing down of a carceral archipelago, but rather is the building up people and communities through constellations of resources, support, accountability and the restoration of relationships with place, people, and other living things. An anti-colonial abolitionism is concerned with the very way we cultivate this world, communities, each other, and ourselves. Just like the authors of this special issue, anti-colonial abolitionism teaches us that justice is and needs many things.

ALL OUR RELATIONS

Given the centrality of colonialism in carceral arrangements, abolition must be grounded in anti-colonial approaches that centre Indigenous knowledge and ways of being. This issue is a part of centering this important and vital energy and knowledge. We open and close this special issue with two anti-colonial abolitionism roundtables organized for the Native American Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) conference of 2021.

The roundtables open and close this special issue in a good way; to help guide the reader through the collection of works from beginning to end through the levels and layers of understanding why and how anti-colonial abolitionism is just as important now. The opening roundtable discusses the regional Prairie context of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba in the land known as Canada and offers important understandings of an anti-colonial approach to abolition. The panel discusses the intricacies of abolition and the significance of land, relations, and art as conditions to the human spirit. The roundtable includes the soulful works of the late Cory Cardinal, an Indigenous and incarcerated advocate for prisoner rights who, along with Tim Felfoldi, contributed artwork to this special issue of the *JPP*. The concluding roundtable offers an international context to anti-colonial abolitionism featuring the expertise and powerful stories of Sheri Pranteau, an Oji-Cree and formerly incarcerated woman, along with the powerful poetry of other incarcerated Indigenous women. The roundtable provides an important international context that highlights the possibilities for anti-colonial abolitionism globally.

The writings presented throughout this special issue by Vickie Roach, Keenan Mundine, Nolan Turcotte, Patricia Walsh, Ken Canning (*Burruga Gutya*), Jeff Ewert, Daryle Kent, Devon Ebach, Pierre Parent, Kim Mckee, Jason Tighe Fong, Teddy Francis, an anonymous writer, John Derek Mills,

and Jason Cyr are each uniquely rich and diverse, but all collectively reveal how a criminal approach to justice continues to colonize people, places, and lands. They equally reveal, as Tabitha Lean and Debbie Kilroy state in their *Response* to this issue, that abolition is “simple” and that justice is already a practice outside of prisons. Each author brings a situated knowledge and expansive wisdom that crosses generations of ancestors with deep roots and connections with the land, people, and community well beyond the imaginaries of the state or prison (McIntosh, 2018). The authors often discuss how they were repeatedly exposed to colonial systems and conditions of segregation, assimilation, and the severing from families and communities prior to incarceration. As children, they lost their names, families, languages, and traditions, and often experienced a host of violences and abuses. These experiences are recreated through the prison which is only part of a long string of carceral violence. As expressed by many of the issue contributors, connections and culture are vital for healing and retaining a sense of self in relation to who one is and where one belongs. The authors of this special issue, like their ancestors before them, are creative and brilliant forces that are shifting the tides of colonial and carceral twinning to get themselves – and many of us – home and to safety.

CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES TO DECONSTRUCT PRISONS

The prison is artificial, synthetic – “there are no stories, no songs, no connecting with nature” (Chartrand & Rougier, 2021). This artificial environment is reflective of a colonial logic that is designed in the image of a white modern civility that proliferates our landscape and that continues to separate and segregate families, communities, and many other connections. As Fran Sugar and Lana Fox (1990, p. 4) note:

Prison cannot remedy the problem of the poverty of reserves. It cannot deal with immediate or historical memories of the genocide that Europeans worked upon our people. It cannot remedy violence, alcohol abuse, sexual assault during childhood, rape, and other violence... Prison cannot heal the abuse of foster homes, or the indifference and racism of justice systems in its dealings with Aboriginal people.

Instead, prison must be understood as a source of violence, assimilation, and colonial discipline. The criminalization and containment of a system vested in “criminal” justice cannot be set apart from the colonizing logics that seek to dispossess and segregate people from life sustaining relations. The authors of this issue expose the colonial patterns of the carceral or what Art Solomon (1994, p. 81) describes as the “abomination” of the prison – an abomination that continues to “disrupt the naturalness of who we are”.

Like the authors of this special issue, anti-colonial abolitionism teaches us to think imaginatively about possibilities for justice and accountability, beyond the scope of traditional, bureaucratic, “criminal” justice models. This could include investing in community self-determination, honouring land and treaty agreements, investing in land-based teachings and healing, and providing safe and accessible housing, and a basic livable income among other resources. We need to be creative in divesting from punitive responses to what is a colonial problem – but mostly, we need to collectively live a life without prisons. This is needed today to address the sweeping challenges that confront us in the 21st century and so-called modern world. Our future depends on us confronting the injustice of colonial structures – including prisons – and colonial dispossession strategies of First Nations lands and waters. Coming together, whether on the streets, in communities, at public events, or through collections such as this one, enacts the justice for which we are agitating.

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