ARTICLES

Anti-Colonial Abolitionism: Prairies Context

Karrie Auger, Danielle Bird, Cory Cardinal, Megan Gnanasihamany, Serenity Joo, Molly Swain, Nancy Van Styvendale and Belinda Wandering Spirit

DEDICATION

We dedicate this publication to Cory Cardinal, kinanaskomitinan. We are grateful to you, for continuing to be a flame that ignites both the love and fury in our peoples. Your endless dedication and commitment to the movement through your words, poetry, art, and advocacy will always be a powerful and loving remembering of how we can continue to create a world where we care for each other, nourish each other, and keep each other safe.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Karrie Auger is a nehiyaw iskwew residing in amiskwaciy, Treaty 6, Metis Nation of Alberta Region 4. Her home community is in Treaty 8 territory, Wabasca Bigstone Cree Nation. She is continuously learning what it means to come home to the land, herself and our relations. She is a member of Free Lands Free Peoples (FLFP) and the Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta Abolition Coalition (SMAAC).

Danielle Bird (nehiyaw) is a member of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation in Alberta and has familial ties to the Mistawasis Nehiyawak in Saskatchewan. Danielle is a PhD student in the Department of Indigenous studies at the University of Saskatchewan where her research examines Indigenous Peoples' post-prison realities in settler colonial Saskatchewan.

Cory Cardinal (1983-2021) was a Cree writer, prisoner justice advocate and founder of Inmates 4 Humane Conditions, a prisoner-led advocacy group. Born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and a member of Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation. Cory devoted many years to advocating for his incarcerated kin, highlighting systemic issues like overcrowding, unhygienic conditions, and lack of access to adequate medical care and other supports inside prisons. Through his writing, artwork and organizing, Cory gifted us with his astute

analysis of the structural racism and colonial function of the penal system in Canada, as well as modeling an ethics of care that informs our work. He passed away on June 9, 2021.

Megan Gnanasihamany is an artist, writer and curator from amiskwaciy who now lives in Tio'tia:ke.

Serenity Joo is a settler of color residing on Treaty One and the homeland of the Métis Nation (Winnipeg, Canada). Locally, she is a member of the Prison Libraries Committee (PLC) that provides books to people on the inside; Prairie Asian Organizers (PAO!), a collective committed to organizing in solidarity with fellow racialized and Indigenous communities; and the Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta Abolition Coalition (SMAAC). She is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Theatre, Film & Media at the University of Manitoba, where she studies and teaches speculative fiction, multiethnic American literatures, critical race theory, and queer theory.

Molly Swain is an otipêmsiw-iskwêw currently living in Treaty 6, Métis Nation of Alberta Region 4, and nehiyaw-pwat territory. Molly is a PhD student in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta researching 20th century Métis political history. She is a member of Free Lands Free Peoples (FLFP) and the Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta Abolition Coalition (SMAAC). She is also the co-host of Métis in Space, an Indigenous feminist science fiction podcast and Land Back project.

Nancy Van Styvendale is a white settler scholar of Indigenous prison literatures and community-based education, and the director of the Indigenous Prison Arts and Education Project in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta. Nancy has lived in the prairies for most of her life and currently resides in amiskwaciy (also known as Edmonton, Alberta), located in Treaty 6 and Métis territory. She is a member of Free Lands Free Peoples (FLFP) and the Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta Abolition Coalition (SMAAC).

Belinda Wandering Spirit is a settler/"re-settler" (Dr. Emma LaRocque) of Scottish-Irish descent from Winnipeg, Manitoba. Belinda is an organizer with Bar None – an abolitionist prisoner solidarity group that runs a

rideshare to connect those incarcerated with their loved ones. Belinda completed her master's degree looking at whiteness, education, and racism at University of Manitoba in the Native Studies department. Her current research area explores racism in the Canadian justice system. Belinda is married to her soulmate Joseph Wandering Spirit and is the proud mother to five Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean children.

ROUNDTABLE

This article is the discussion resulting from one of two linked Anti-Colonial Abolitionism roundtables at the 2021 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) conference. One of the roundtables, which is the concluding piece in the article section of this special issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, is on anti-colonial abolitionism in a global context – specifically, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa (New Zealand). The roundtable below focuses on anti-colonial abolitionism in a local context, with the speakers coming from or having connections to one or more of the three Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, in the land currently known as Canada. We begin with brief biographies to locate ourselves in relation to these lands and our respective work as abolitionists.

Nancy: To get started, I invite everyone to say a little bit about what brought you to your work in support of penal abolition and the unique skills and perspectives that you bring from your own positionality and location. By "penal abolition", we mean the movement to defund and dismantle policing, prisons and the attendant carceral apparatus.

Karrie: I got into the realm of abolition through Nancy, our moderator. She sat behind me at an art event and told me about a position for a research assistant in critical prison studies she was hiring for. I applied and got the position. It felt like creator pushed me in that direction, the door opened and it was where I needed to be. The more I did the research and the more that I was in this community, the more I realized that this is where my heart work is. I find abolition to be the most fulfilling thing for me.

Molly: I have been moving in and out of abolitionist spaces for around the past ten years. I believe very strongly that liberation – total liberation – is a

goal that we should all be working for. I have a real, embodied sense of the possibilities of liberation. When Karrie and Nancy approached me to get involved and start abolition organizing, I jumped right on it. It felt important to do this work in my home territories, to make those interventions and do consciousness raising. As for skills and perspectives, I bring an anarchist systems perspective to my abolition work. I am particularly interested in public education and bringing an abolitionist awareness to the prairies, especially Alberta. In Alberta, our current political climate is right wing and oppressive. There is also a lot of dehumanization going on of oppressed people generally and I think we see that to an even greater degree with people who are caught up in carceral systems.

Serenity: In 2016, I went through the Walls to Bridges training program on how to teach classes of mixed students (insiders and outsiders) in prison. As a fan and scholar of speculative fiction, I have always been interested in how people of colour have imagined other worlds and it has led me to think about abolition as another way of imagining futures. I have been teaching a lot on prison abolition recently, mostly because my students are demanding that content.

Belinda: My journey to abolition has been multifaceted. Various experiences growing up introduced me to the Canadian policing and justice system. Throughout my life, I witnessed various family members and close friends, many of whom were marginalized and racialized, having oppressive, negative, and unfair interactions with the courts and carceral system. Later, I attended university and in my undergraduate and graduate degrees we explored the theoretical underpinnings to structural racism and further deconstructed the unjustness of the Canadian justice system. Based on these experiences, and others, I felt called to learn more and to become a support to those that are caught in our system. I reached out to a community abolition group – Bar None – to discuss starting a support group for people navigating our justice system. Upon meeting the organizers, I instantly felt at home with the wonderful people volunteering for positive social change. Bar None's organizers were all like-minded folks who were committed to community. My research/education and volunteer work, partnered with my supportive family life, created a passion for abolition work and hoping for a better future for all. My husband is a Sundancer and, as a spiritual family, we live a ceremonial

life. All in all, the belief of 'Walking in a Good Way' and love for all those in our community coupled with witnessing unfairness in our system created a space where all paths in my life ultimately led to abolition.

Megan: I came to abolition as a feeling first, in that abolition provided a community and a framework that worked to explain values I already held. Abolition enabled me to go from a politics of 'hating the cops' to operating within a framework for understanding justice and care in really expansive ways through collaboration with other people and building a broader understanding of solidarity. I have been a member of Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project (TPRP) for just over a year – they are a prisoner-led organizing group based in Toronto, focusing on justice in Ontario prisons and jails including local projects around community education and running a Prisoner Emergency Support Fund. Last year, I was the curator in residence at Latitude 53 Gallery in Edmonton. The program was a ten-week, open research residency and I entered it with the desire to focus my research on connecting my experience in the arts as a visual artist, as well as a curator with abolitionist organizing for a more just future. I reached out to Karrie, Nancy and Molly of Free Lands Free Peoples and we've been collaborating on creating an exhibition of artwork and writing from people who are currently incarcerated in Prairie institutions, including Saskatoon Correctional Centre and Pine Grove Correctional Centre. The exhibition will be both online and in a zine format that can be mailed so that the show can be accessible to people both outside and inside of the prison. The curatorial framing is around the dreams, ideas, visions of prairie people, for a future of freedom, and care beyond police and prisons.

Danielle: My interest in anti-colonial penal abolition emerged out of the research I conducted as a part of my MA research here at the University of Saskatchewan. During my undergraduate studies, I had noticed that criminological discourses consistently discussed Indigenous people and Indigenous communities in relation to narratives of dysfunction and deficiency. I entered graduate studies frustrated with the disconnect between what I was reading in the academic literature and my lived experiences growing up in the inner-city. At that time, I was actively engaged in anti-colonial theorizing and critical prison studies, but I had not embraced abolition. It was not until I was in the final stages of my graduate research

that I began to see parallels between anti-colonial and abolitionist pursuits for freedom. As a result, I embraced my own anti-colonial abolitionist standpoint because I could no longer ignore the ways in which prisons and decades of reform have only served to legitimize inhumane forms of punishment by making the prison more palatable through diversification and problematic 'pan-Indigenization' initiatives.

Nancy: Thanks everyone. I should also say something about how I came to abolition and the specific commitments and perspectives I bring. As an academic with training in the field of Indigenous literatures, I have a background studying literary texts produced by incarcerated Indigenous writers. I also have experience doing work inside jails and prisons with people who are incarcerated, primarily through a creative writing program called Inspired Minds. Both Karrie and I have facilitated Inspired Minds classes at the Edmonton Institution. I began that work at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre and I have worked very closely with a number of people inside, including Cory Cardinal, a Cree prisoner justice advocate whose work we will highlight later in the discussion. I am committed to amplifying Indigenous prisoner voices and helping to facilitate the creation and dissemination of literary texts by incarcerated people. In terms of my own journey to abolition, I would say that I became an abolitionist because of those relationships with people inside, who perhaps do not use the language of abolition per se, but who are on the frontlines of living through and resisting the oppressive conditions of the prison. Karrie and I have had that conversation after our creative writing classes, about the toxic environment that characterizes prisons, and about needing to try and create relational spaces within those very unrelational environments, but then also doing work on the outside to try and bring those institutions down.

Let's turn now to a conversation about the basics of abolition. Some people may not be aware of what abolition is – and more specifically, what anti-colonial abolitionism is. It is important to clarify the contours of anti-colonial abolitionism as we understand it, both as an imagined horizon and a current set of practices, especially in relation to our local prairie contexts.

Danielle: Anti-colonial penal abolition is a movement. It is a combination of theory and action that acknowledge policing, prisons, and carceral logics of punishment are not effective mechanisms for keeping people safe or

for addressing harms within our social locations. Within a prairie context, and more specifically, within settler colonial Saskatchewan, anti-colonial abolitionism recognizes that Indigenous Peoples have long been targets for settler colonial modes of social control and carceral logics that remain embedded in ongoing genocides committed against Indigenous Peoples. Anti-colonial abolition, as a movement, not only seeks to dismantle the current injustice system, but also seeks to find ways to provide people in our communities with the contextually diverse social, economic, and political tools, and cultural supports they require outside of the inherently dysfunctional nature of policing and prisons. From my perspective, anti-colonial abolitionism is not separate or distinct from the larger abolitionist movement, but instead complements and strengthens collective efforts to imagine and build alternative worlds. Anti-colonial abolitionist imagining and organizing is important because it forces us to engage critically with the problematic "one-size fits all" solutions to addressing harms in our communities and asks that we interrogate the ways in which piecemeal state reforms – such as "pan-Indigenous" cultural programming inside of prisons – have only strengthened and expanded the punitive reach of prisons and policing within our communities.

Molly: What we are looking to do, I think, as Free Lands Free Peoples, is to really emphasize that the so-called Canadian justice system is, at its core, a function of colonialism and as such is a violation of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination, as well as traditional and ongoing Indigenous legal regimes. We recognize through anticolonial abolition that the penal system works to contain, control, and ultimately remove Indigenous people from our lands in order to make those lands accessible to settlement and to resource extraction. Not only does the penal system violate Indigenous sovereignty, but it exists as a series of interconnected systems and institutions that actively continue to work to repress us in a variety of areas of our lives. The control is not only functioning within the walls of the prison, but throughout society as well. Prisons and policing are also extensions of historical colonial tactics of Indigenous dispossession and disappearance. Prisons have been called a continuation of Residential Schools. As for the police, it is very clear, especially on the prairies, that they are an extension of the military invasion of Indigenous lands and maintain an armed occupation force on our territories. We also recognise – and this is

something that has come up a lot with the Movement for Black Lives over the past year – that the penal system is not only not designed to keep us safe, it actively undermines our safety and survival as peoples and as individuals.

These systems work exactly how they were intended to – to solve the Indian problem (among other things). The eternal problem of the colonizer. We like to bring up Daniel Heath Justice's idea of imagining otherwise, and we also talk about remembering otherwise to point to the non-carceral Indigenous justice traditions that have and continue to exist. I think it is also important at this point to connect broader sovereignty movements to this facet of abolition. Like resistance actions, land defence and water protection, Land Back, etc. These movements are also forms of abolitionist worldbuilding. This is the creation of new worlds, new ways of relating, new ways of being together, because it is about looking to (re)establish and move into worlds and ways of relating that exist very much counter to and beyond the colonial society that equates justice with violence, containment, punishment, and removal.

Belinda: To approach this question from the re-settler side, abolition is one of the most important undertakings of our time as non-Indigenous people. We especially need to focus on whose land we are on (Indigenous lands) and what abolition really means. As general society is becoming increasingly aware of the inequality in our communities regarding targeted policing, and the uneven application of laws and sentences for Indigenous people and People of Colour, we are noting that the current system is not working and needs to change. I worry that if we elect to employ abolition strategies and fail to recognize the impacts of colonization on incarceration and an injustice system enforcing foreign laws on stolen lands, we are not doing the movement justice. As a result of colonial incursion and oppression, our society was built on white supremacist ideals. On Indigenous lands, the question of penal abolition is linked to the hypocrisy of land theft and the misapplication of treaties. Effective and unprejudiced abolitionist solutions must be taken into account. Recognizing, as non-Indigenous people, that we reside on Indigenous lands is just one more step towards reconciliation and a society based on equity.

Karrie: As a nehiyaw person, we think about things in terms of relationships. With those relationships comes a responsibility to care for all of our relatives. From this worldview, it feels both like an obligation and

an inevitability that abolition will come to be something that Indigenous peoples will take up across the world. It is imperative for Indigenous peoples to take it up. We are starting to see that and there definitely seems to be more interest as people are really starting to be really curious about what abolition is, and wanting to imagine and remember worlds together. For me that is recognizing Indigenous sovereignty, governance, and justice systems before colonization, and taking parts of those and parts of what the abolition community is building, and creating something that is grounded in Indigenous concepts of relationality in this place and this time.

Serenity: Anti-colonial abolition is a project of decolonization. But I, too, do not want to make too big a distinction between anti-colonial abolition and other forms of abolition. Many of us working in abolition are deeply indebted to – and fundamentally our work is interconnected with – theories and practices of abolition as has been articulated by Black feminist abolitionists and other Black radical thinkers. In the US, abolition is historically and legally tied to resistance against the institution of enslavement. In the Canadian context, especially on the prairies, there are different genealogies and there are different ways to trace the history of abolition – ones that are entangled with anticolonial resistance and treaty history. Here, I am drawing from Aimee Craft's (2013) research on how the Anishinaabe refused to sign treaties until their people that were held in jails being run by the British crown and the Hudson Bay Company were let go, as the idea of prison and jailing went against Anishinaabe understandings of self-governance, land use, and their principles of non-interference.

Nancy: When I first became familiar with abolitionist praxis about eight years ago, there was a very strong anti-racist framework for that work. Now, in abolitionist communities across the country, I think we also see a turn towards an anti-colonial analysis, and a growing understanding of the connection between anti-colonial abolitionism and Indigenous sovereignty. That growing understanding is really heartening. But amongst the general public, there is often still quite a bit of misunderstanding and discomfort when it comes to abolition. In my experience, when you mention abolition or even post about it on social media, there is often a resounding silence. It seems like people are uncomfortable or they do not want to engage with it. Does that resonate with any of you?

Danielle: There are a number of reasons why people in our own communities feel uncomfortable engaging in discussion on abolition. But for our purposes, I really want to emphasize that much of the counter-discourse I have encountered is rooted in this notion of fear. Settler colonial logics of carceral control are so insidious that many people now falsely conflate crime with harm and the caging of humans with safety. Settler colonial laws and legal systems are never equally applied to all and as I have stated elsewhere, our current understanding of what constitutes a crime is always dependent upon the social, political, and economic conditions in which crime emerges. In other words, our definitions of crime change over time and what may have been considered a criminal act at one point in time may not be considered criminal at another point in time. Similarly, different types of actions that are labelled as "criminal" are not always harmful and actions that are known to cause harm are not always considered criminal. The fact remains that the majority of people who are caged in prisons are eventually released back into the communities at some point in time and we must be prepared to discuss, imagine, and implement the contextually diverse social, economic, and political tools, and cultural supports outside of prisons and without police surveillance.

Karrie: Abolition was so hard for me to imagine – it was beyond anything I had ever thought of. I had never considered that prisons, policing, and punishment were not "natural". A lot of people struggle with abolition because they get stuck on the question of, "what about all the 'bad' people? What do we do with all the 'bad' people? Because if we do not have prisons, then there is no way we can address harm". Without having an alternative framework for understanding harm and violence, people get uncomfortable with this idea that there is going to be unaddressed harm and violence everywhere, and they are not going to be safe in any capacity anymore. They think that the obvious and only solution is prisons. And if abolitionists cannot give them an exact framework or say one hundred percent, "this is what is going to happen" then people are like, "well, I have nothing to hold on to, if you do not have all the answers maybe we should just stick with the system we already have".

Molly: One of the things that probably makes people uncomfortable is that abolition and doing this imagining and relational work requires that we step in

towards conflict, rather than push conflict and the people involved in conflict away. That is a big part of what prisons and policing do – they physically remove people from their communities and their families. It is a lot easier to remove conflict than it is to work together and step into it to address what the root causes of harm are. Abolitionists are doing that deeper dive radical work to unpack how those systems negatively impact all of us and contribute to interpersonal violence and interpersonal conflict and harm.

It is this disposability – the idea that some people are just bad and we should throw them in jail. Disposability is that undercurrent that runs through all of these carceral systems. Counter to that, relational Indigenous justice traditions require that we embrace conflict, rather than push it away and embrace those who cause harm. And bring people back into balance, bring people back into community, rather than removing them and punishing them until they are sufficiently shamed or sufficiently punished to be let back into society. Among the Métis and the Dakota, there was an instance when some Métis were in conflict with the Dakota where the Dakota had killed a couple of Métis, then the Métis killed some Dakota people – the response was not to put people in jail, or expel them from the community, or escalate the violence. The response instead was for the Dakota to adopt the Métis that had retaliated, to bring them into the family, so that they could take on the roles of the people that they had killed, contribute to the family, and to have those relational responsibilities towards those people. That is such a wildly different understanding of justice – a wildly different understanding of resolving conflict than what we have today.

Those are the kinds of alternatives that, until quite recently, have existed on these lands. I think one thing that is important to remember is that abolition makes people uncomfortable in large part because the state is invested in making abolition and non-carceral justice alternatives seem scary and ineffective. We really saw that reality over this past year with the Movement for Black Lives, and the call to defund and abolish the police. Incredible collective mobilization, but we are also continuing to see the backlash, and the intensification of state forces and propaganda telling us over and over again that police and prisons have to exist to keep us safe, even when in the most basic sense, they truly do not. At best, they are reactive. They do not solve anything. They do not address anything until the harm has been caused, but we are all told to believe in almost the

sanctity of the penal system and that hierarchical authority. A big part of stepping into abolition is learning to sit with that discomfort, and to address that discomfort in yourself and to unpack the ways in which the state is constituting how we see justice.

Nancy: It is those persistent structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy and capitalism, along with those who uphold those structures, that cause the most harm. As an anti-colonial abolitionist, I am personally less interested in how to address the "harms" caused by people who are currently locked up, although this is certainly an important consideration and I do not want to downplay the need for accountability. It is important to keep in mind, though, that lots of people who are incarcerated have not necessarily done anything harmful. Many are there because of the state's criminalization of drug use, sex work or poverty. Given that, I am actually more interested in how to address the harms that are experienced by incarcerated people, both before they are incarcerated and within the institution, which we know to be traumatic. That to me is one of the big shifts in thinking that abolition invites.

Megan: I'm reminded of an article from last year by Tamara K. Nopper (2020) called "Abolition is not a Suburb", which responds to one rhetorical device that people use when doing early education work of explaining "abolition" by comparing an abolitionist future to the present relative feeling of safety in a white, affluent suburb. What she points out in the article is that that kind of freedom and that kind of safety that exists in the suburb are contingent on the unfreedom of not only people who are incarcerated and criminalized, but also people living in neighborhoods that are abandoned, under-resourced and overpoliced. Part of the uncomfortability, especially for white people and for all of us whose freedom is contingent on the unfreedom of someone else, is that there is then an onus on change and responsibility. The idea that you are not responsible for other people's safety, that you are not implicated in their experiences of unsafety and subjugation – that assumption is removed through abolition. Part of it is also an uncomfortability with the ways in which we are actually responsible for each other, and the resulting care work that an abolitionist future and present really calls us to contribute.

Serenity: It being hard to imagine a world without prisons is also a fundamental part of prison culture. It is an extension of policing, the

policing of our imaginations. Angela Davis (2003) calls the prison a black hole where we can stuff all our problems away. We do not want to talk about substance abuse, we do not want to talk about mental illness, we do not want to talk about violence, or poverty, or other social oppressions. Prisons serve a cultural and psychological function as a container, as much as it literally contains people physically, because we do not want to do the real work of cultivating and caring for people.

Nancy: What does anticolonial abolition look like on the prairies specifically? As a way of getting into that, we wanted to share with people the work of prisoner justice advocate Cory Cardinal, which I mentioned earlier. I'm going to read from a letter to the public that he published in Briarpatch magazine (Cardinal, 2021). At the time, he was organizing a group of prisoners at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre who were planning a hunger strike in response to the deplorable conditions inside, which were created by the Government of Saskatchewan's inept response to COVID-19, and their unwillingness to address the dangers it posed to prisoners' health and wellbeing. We wanted to share some of the letter because in it he speaks powerfully to his own position as someone who is incarcerated and the larger colonial context in which he is situated.

Cory (read by Nancy): I speak on behalf of a generation of young, lost Aboriginal warriors, surviving in a postmodern-day institution of colonial suppression that has unjustly labelled us as 'criminals' and 'thieves' as part of a 154-year-long campaign to diminish our identities as protectors of our people. Within this architecture of oppression, we are a vibrant community of strong, intelligent brothers who eat together, wrestle and play together, and protect each other from a system that has exploited us…. It is true we have been targeted as Aboriginal men by a racist system. Despite this epidemic of incarceration, our resilient community of modern Aboriginal warriors has survived by will and creative ambition to prevail over many an enemy of poverty, addiction, and racism…. We are inmates of not only institutions of incarceration, but every other institution that has dominated us for years. We are inmates of poverty, of high suicide rates, of disease and of overrepresentation in the justice system. The current events surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak in provincial prisons is an example of a 154-year-old tradition... which must not go unrecognized. The cycle of systemic

oppression must be broken and must be recognized for what it is: a modern-day act of genocide meant to eradicate a vulnerable people.

Nancy: I really wish Cory could be here to share that with us. His thinking has animated our analysis as anti-colonial abolitionists and the drive that we must do this work. I wanted to hold space for that and thank him for his contributions, his tireless contributions, to anticolonial abolition on the prairies and in Saskatchewan in particular.

Karrie: Cory's writing always makes me feel a little bit emotional. I find it to be so impactful. When I hear his words, and in the few chances we have heard him speak, it really makes me think about some of the men that we have been able to sit in a circle with on the inside, doing creative writing. I have not been incarcerated, so I am speaking as an Indigenous person who has been impacted by colonization in residential schools and such, but not through the carceral system specifically. There is something very familiar about the people that we have worked with, like a connective tissue – something in their experience, in the ways that they carry themselves – that is so familiar to myself and to my family; a shared understanding, even if it is not explicitly stated. We understand the things that people grow up with when they grew up in the prairie provinces, and the harms and violence that we experience. A large part of that has to do with the ways that the prairies were settled, and the way that prisons and policing play out in the prairies, but also residential schools and the sixties scoop. There are a lot of commonalities in the violence that Indigenous peoples have experienced in this place.

For Indigenous people, place is so important – we have a deep-rooted connection to the land. As a nehiyaw person, who I am is directly connected to and comes from the land. This connective tissue to place is both culturally connected and in the ways that settler colonialism has enacted such extreme violence. That is why it is important that when we do this work, we ensure that what we are doing is responsive to our relatives in this place and not to think that this work can be applied the same in different places. We have to think about the very specific histories that we have experienced as Indigenous peoples here.

Molly: What we have been experiencing on the prairies is not necessarily unique to the prairies, but the ways in which a lot of policing, Residential

Schools and other forms of violence, and the death drive of colonialism, have impacted us is going to be specific to the region. One well-known example is that the North-West Mounted Police, now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, was birthed as a military invasion and occupation force in the prairies to control Indigenous movement and anti-colonial resistance, and to protect Canada's interests in what are now, of course, the prairie provinces. This is a role that the RCMP continues to fulfill across the territory claimed by Canada. To this day, 30 percent of all police are part of the RCMP. There is this direct connection between contemporary policing and this historical force that was birthed to quash a prairie-region Indigenous resistance to Canadian expansion. The tactics for the suppression of Indigenous life are going to be specific to the region, but also the forms of resistance are going to be as well. We are going to be using different strategies and taking up different analyses to build movements that are reflective of our local conditions, our local needs, as well as our nations' own justice regimes. We talk a lot in Free Lands Free Peoples about wahkôtowin and miyo-wicêtowin in our work, which are Cree and Métis laws that really outline the importance and the details of how to be in good relation. Of course, the centrality of place, the centrality of the land to our peoples is going to mean that that is going to look different than Inuit conceptions of justice and good relations or to Skwxwú7mesh justice and relationality, etc. It makes sense on the material, the practical side of things, to do it in ways that are locally and regionally specific.

Nancy: Drawing from what you said, Molly, I wanted to link back quickly to Cory's piece and underscore the importance of relationality within it, and the way that he talks in multiple places about the relations between incarcerated brothers. That connects, of course, to the Cree and Métis laws that you are speaking of, the interconnectedness of all things and being in good relations. I want to highlight that we can see prisoners who are enacting those laws despite being contained by colonial laws. Our next question has to do with anti-colonial and anti-carceral community-based supports and alternatives in urban prairie communities, and what is needed.

Belinda: Bar None for example is anti-colonial and anti-carceral. They are inclusive to all Nations, to all people, and work tirelessly to provide a rideshare and other community supports for folks dealing with their loved ones involved with the Manitoba justice system. This topic is interesting to

me, the idea of community support in urban spaces. I often think about what people incarcerated and their loved ones need. I spoke to somebody supporting their incarcerated loved one the other day. What happens to folks who do not have loved ones to help them through the many years and expenses of having a person in their life incarcerated? Incarcerated people come out of the prison system often with no apartment, no phone, their credit ruined and no job. My thoughts are that this system is just built to penalize and put people at a disadvantage. There are some community support solutions, but there are still massive gaps regarding how to assist incarcerated people leaving the carceral system, while still keeping colonialism 'solutions' at bay.

Molly: One of the things that often gets forgotten is that we are not just talking about big conflict, big harm. We are not just talking about the stuff that the state really wants to clamp down on or says it does. Abolition and alternatives to the penal system – we are all doing it every day. Any time that you have conflict and you do not turn to the police, you do not turn to punishing people. When you have conflict with your family, generally, you try to work it out and you do not have to bring in the state to do it. Maybe you will have somebody come in and mediate for you or maybe you need a little time away from one another, but you are not going to remove that person from the family in most instances. Or maybe there are times where some people do need to take time away from a community and a community needs people to take that time. But they are not going to involve the state. They are not going to involve the cops. I have heard folks talk about how kids are good abolitionists because they are always addressing conflict when it happens among themselves – resolving conflict and repairing relationships. Whenever we do that reparative work among ourselves, that can be, in the small scale, a model for bigger and better things. I think a lot of the work that is happening around transformative justice or restorative justice is very much pointing to that future where we take up that responsibility.

Nancy: Thanks Molly. Belinda, perhaps you could share how COVID-19 has exposed or exacerbated conditions inside prisons. What have things been like in Manitoba? What have you been hearing from people inside?

Belinda: During the period of COVID-19, I have been collecting information, while also being gifted stories and worries from people across

Manitoba. These stories come from concerned loved ones and folks (among other reputable sources) that were incarcerated or involved in our various federal and provincial carceral institutions. I will try to summarize some of the main concerns because my list is long. The main point I would like to impart is that incarcerated folks are being treated badly during this pandemic and otherwise. These concerns are not just about individual institutions or guards but about our system. These folks that have been removed from their loved ones and incarcerated are being treated in a way that I think most people would be pretty upset with, even if they are not abolitionists. For example – provincially, visits to prisoners stopped in March 2019, that is currently about 14 months or so back. Incarcerated people have not seen their loved ones' faces for over a year now. There was discussion about video visits, but they have yet to manifest. At one point during this pandemic, a few loved ones with folks incarcerated had informed me that there were over thirty days that people in prisons did not get outside time. There was a long period of time where many prisoners were being placed into solitary, sometimes for long periods of time. Prison library services have been limited or for various institutions, ended completely. Medical implements were removed from folks who need them. As well, both federal and provincial programming has been halted, which impacts various areas such as parole, ability to move into different security levels within the institutions and healing ranges, and even more importantly, this impacts the prisoners' mental health.

Karrie: In Alberta, it has been similar. There is not a lot of transparency from corrections in terms of what is really going down on the inside. A lot of information will come from the official corrections websites, but that information differs a lot from information coming directly from our relations on the inside. Imagine being inside with these horrendously unsanitary conditions, being on constant lockdown, no ability to properly social distance in crowded cells, and then people have no access to the things that can help them take care of themselves. It is a horrendous thing to think about.

Nancy: One piece of statistical information I found had to do with the rate of infection and the fact that 10 percent of federal prisoners have been infected with COVID-19. That is in comparison to two percent

of the general overall population in Canada. You can see starkly the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 has had on incarcerated people. Would anyone like to talk about how their group and the work that they are doing has been impacted by COVID-19?

Serenity: Prison Libraries Committee (PLC) goes into several prisons throughout Manitoba and all our inside programming has halted everywhere. As Belinda was saying, visitors cannot go in and any kind of outsider programming, from what we know, is shut down. I have heard that the university classes that were being taught inside have also very abruptly stopped. They did not pivot to a remote world like the rest of the world did. All of this shows how vulnerable this type of work is. We basically had one person that was our contact on the inside who was kind of okay with us getting books into people's hands. We lost contact with this person and everything collapsed. Because we could not go inside, we decided to reach out to other organizations locally. We collaborated with Bar None to support people who have loved ones on the inside who could not go visit them by making and delivering care packages. This created a bit of coalition building between the two organizations. For PLC this past year, COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and everything else has tilted it toward a more abolitionist framework than it had been before.

Megan: It has been a similar situation in trying to put together an exhibition featuring artwork and writing from people inside the prison system – you are relying on the mail system working. You are also relying on people having a contact inside with whom they can correspond to share the call for submissions, to spread information, and to help facilitate the art and writing getting sent into exhibit. Relative to the conditions that everyone has been describing, there is a real lack of safety, there is a lack of Personal Protective Equipment, there is the actual risk of getting sick, and prisons and jails have been relying on lockdowns to further control, isolate, and punish instead of providing any actual safety measures for people inside. The psychological cost of living under those conditions leaves so little energy for art making, for even thinking about trying to create artwork. Having to focus on your health, on your survival, creates a barrier – that is beside the material inaccessibility right now to visits, mail, and even physical space and materials for artmaking. Creative work is also social and communal for

so many people – not being able to access loved ones and community is an incredible mental and emotional barrier to art making. This is not to say that these are conditions that show that exhibiting art by people inside the prison system is uniquely difficult, but rather that COVID-19 exacerbated and made more visible the conditions of inequality and systems of oppression that were already there and brought them up to the surface to make them visible to a much broader public, to make clear how intense the effect that space has on a person.

Belinda: Bar None experienced this disruption as well. Bar None usually operates a rideshare to connect those incarcerated with their loved ones, but early on institutional visits were ended. Another area of impact was the family support group that we started and promptly paused because it was better to meet in person for safety reasons. Throughout the pandemic, Bar None organizers now have been meeting and connecting remotely, which helps to keep everyone supported. Abolition work is hard enough without the added strain of COVID-19. I know the Bar None members feel heartache over the various issues facing those incarcerated during COVID-19 and want to hold space for them, as well as each other. Lastly, we are reading Mariame Kaba's (2021) new book, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, to help keep connected and continue our education on abolition topics.

Nancy: We have talked a lot about the perils of COVID-19, but it has also made certain things possible in a strange way. I am wondering, Karrie and Molly, if you could speak to what you have seen in terms of the possibilities that have arisen during this time.

Molly: The first thing is that the provinces moved quickly at the beginning of the pandemic to decarcerate – to release people before their institutionally mandated release dates. Estimates range from around 20 to 30 percent reduction in provincial jails, which is incredible. Not only because that makes so many people relatively safer during the pandemic, but it also demonstrates how doable decarceration really is. But there has been a shift since then to where the provinces are clamping back down on the rhetoric of "people deserve to be in prison, people have to be in prison, we cannot decarcerate". During and immediately prior to the Saskatchewan prisoner hunger strikes

in December 2020 and January 2021, the Saskatchewan Minister of Corrections, Christine Tell, said to people who were calling for decarceration that COVID-19 is not a "get out of jail free card". So, it has been interesting watching the state try to navigate this pandemic. Prisoner organizing on the prairies has been an incredibly powerful movement. There have been a couple of mentions of the hunger strikes that happened which were important for our region. That kind of action has not occurred, and especially not so publicly, in a long time. Those hunger strikes engendered relationships between people who are incarcerated and people on the outside, including a lot of supporters from all over the world also participating in a solidarity hunger strike, getting the media on board, writing to politicians, and doing that advocacy work. Nancy mentioned that this organizing can also be seen as an expression of Indigenous legal imperatives of relationality, and of coming together and doing that survival work.

Karrie: I remember a conversation that I had with a colleague recently about how marginalized groups are treated differently when it comes to accessing supports. It made me think about when CERB payments were offered for COVID-19 financial relief and the government decided that people needed a basic income of two thousand dollars a month to live. For people with disabilities who get income support, it is significantly lower, unmanageably lower than that. This speaks clearly to possibilities in the sense that it is not that things are impossible, it is just that the state decides who is deserving of that possibility. When the public had to shut down, we had no problem finding money to give them two thousand dollars a month to support them, but when it comes to people with disabilities, we do not have the money. We cannot make it happen. This is a stark reminder of who the state decides is deserving of care and support, and who is not.

Nancy: Before we move on to our last topic, I want to say two things. One, in terms of possibilities created, we have seen, at least in Saskatchewan, inter-institutional prisoner-led organizing in a way that I have not heard of in my time doing this work. Prisoners were organizing and communicating with each other through a network of outside advocates because they are not allowed to call or send letters to each other. Finding ways to circumvent the institution's repression of communication, organizing these inter-institutional hunger strikes is amazingly powerful. It resists the fracturing

of relations, the isolation and alienation, that prisons engineer. I also wanted to mention that Inmates 4 Humane Conditions started a prisoner-led fundraising initiative to support other prisoners and those recently released. Cory Cardinal set up a GoFundMe page through an advocate on the outside. We have seen a proliferation of mutual aid work by outside organizers – Free Lands Free Peoples, Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project – where people have come together in solidarity to support and care for each other. But I wanted to highlight the work of Inmates 4 Humane Conditions because I think it is special in terms of being initiated and generated from inside, despite those conditions of repression. It is very hard to organize inside on the prairies. What was done this past winter will inspire people inside to keep agitating in the ways that they can.

Moving into the last section of our conversation for today, which focuses on artwork and creative expression in abolitionist organizing, I am wondering if we could start with discussing the importance of art inside prison?

Belinda: I have heard many stories relating to art and those incarcerated, and there is one specifically that I wanted to share. One thing to note is that not every person incarcerated has the same access to computers, programming, education or feels drawn to reading. But I have been told that in these institutions, basically everybody draws. I have heard stories that share how new people will enter the institution and they see the people around them drawing, so in their down time they will begin to draw as well. While they are working on their art, the more experienced folks will make an effort to come around to show them how to draw, shade and share other tips on how to develop their artistic abilities. This creates a connection, a comfortability, that brings the people together – all while developing a skill. What was explained to me is that the large majority of those inside do this, guiding each other in their art. This creates a community environment and links the whole space together in a positive way. That felt powerful, the idea of coming in and sketching because the individual needed an outlet or a connection, and another person comes over to teach you how to shade and make your art better, simply from the kindness of their heart. These are not the type of stories we hear as often when discussing folks who are incarcerated.

Karrie: Thank you for the beautiful stories. The state would have us believe that the point of prisons is to correct people's behaviour so that they do

not go back to prison, to reform them. But we deny them all possibility of thinking about life without prisons by not allowing them to explore different worlds, by not allowing them to think about abolition in any context, thinking about what I need in my life to take care of myself, take care of my family, receive the supports I need, and receive the care and love I need. We completely deny them that. That is why it so important to show up in art spaces. Even if we cannot explicitly talk about abolition because it is scary to the prison, we can still world-build, spark that creative imagination in people. Art is so effective in bringing people together. I am thinking of the laughter and the silliness when we are in the classes with the men. When they get comfortable, and then they can make fun of us for not understanding inside lingo and we get teased all the time because we are naive. For a moment, it feels as if there is possibility in that space, not thinking about transforming people's lives but just in that moment, we get to be in relation with each other. And ultimately it feels like a tiny moment of an abolition worldbuilding.

Nancy: This leads us to our last question, which is thinking about how art helps us imagine an abolitionist future. Megan, I want to turn it over to you as someone who has an arts background and has a lot to share on this topic.

Megan: That is such a perfect transition to what I wanted to talk about with art, because I think there is this feeling of possibility and expansiveness in art making. Part of my motivation for this project was to take advantage of this opportunity where I have the support to put on an exhibition and to pay people for it. I wanted to direct that towards showcasing artwork by people who are inside, because I think within both the creative act of art making, as well as in experiencing art, there is a particular potential for dreaming, feeling, and theorizing that should not be limited by carceral borders.

In going to an exhibition or witnessing art online or even sharing a drawing with a friend, there is a production of a kind of connective truth within art that goes beyond what's possible in straightforward language. Even thinking about the idea that a drawing of "a family", for example, is going to have a different connotation than just the word "family" or family photograph. There is an abstraction that is possible within art, and that is relative to whether it is drawing or it is painting, poetry, dance, or movement. Any kind of creative act is an abstraction from the original idea

or object. What this does is that it allows for a truly expansive sense of being and connection because in the abstract space of art, it is possible to get towards some expression that feels true about being alive in the world with other people, something beyond what we are able to put into sentences or even act on entirely. When you are looking at a piece of art and you feel that connection – like Karrie was saying earlier, that emotional feeling of hearing Cory's work – part of what that is, is the recognition that there is something that feels true to you about what it means to be a person, alive in the world in this present moment. That feeling is something that should be available to everyone – I think that is an important part of being a person.

There is a quote from Legacy Russell (2012), whose recent book is called *Glitch Feminism*, shared in this talk that I attended last year where she was speaking about the "poetics of demands". She spoke about demands being part a liberatory politic and about poetry; she described political poetry as an art that uses "strategies of opacity" that "protect" different forms of the imaginary. The abstract quality of art or the ambiguity that is available in art, offers us a form of protection around something that we cannot quite imagine yet, ideas and concepts that are not yet fully formed enough to stand up on their own. Relative to abolition, Karrie brought up this idea of worldbuilding and that seeing somebody create art is part of fomenting that abolitionist future. An important part of that abolitionist future is that it is unknown. There are modes of safety, care, and justice that we are going to be able to imagine after the end of police and prisons, that we cannot even conceive of until the end of carcerality because we will have new context and new channels available, and new relations. Art making allows that kind of unknown to really remain present, because when you are imagining the world to come through a kind of abstract form of drawing or poetry, all that empty space where we do not know the exact thing but still feel that it is true – that is the protection around our imaginaries. I think that gets at what it means to imagine an abolitionist future.

Serenity: I love what you are saying Megan, that worldbuilding is also temporal. Lots of scholars have talked about how denying Indigenous people the right to be future oriented is one of the ways in which settler colonialism works. Now there is this massive output of Indigenous futurism, Afrofuturism, etc., of people of colour writing and imagining themselves into their own futures. adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha (2015)

talk about the idea of visionary fiction. They say that when you are doing abolitionist work, you are imagining radically different futures. They see speculative fiction as a link on a very realistic trajectory. The artistic form of speculative fiction is not only about the science fiction of unimaginable worlds, but also the worlds that many people have already been living, in all sorts of ways. Molly's comment earlier about how abolition seems like such a big word, reminds me of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2021) idea that abolition is in fact "life in rehearsal". Living with intent, everything that you all have been discussing, that is the work of abolition.

Megan: I can share some of the specific questions that are in the call for submissions that we sent inside, because we built them around the question of how do we enable people to start dreaming of the radically different future or to share the dreams and plans they already have. Some of those specific questions are, "Have you ever thought about a future without police and prisons?" "What does it look like?" "How will we take care of each other?" "How will we keep each other safe?" "What does real freedom look like?"

These questions do not have fixed answers or exact answers, which makes them kind of the ideal mode. I think beginning with asking questions that are basically iterations of "what do you want?" opens us to the idea that we should want everything, that we should want this total abundance of care and justice. To me that is part of what abolition is, believing that we really and deeply deserve to have a better, a more just world.

Nancy: Abolition is a practice. It is the practice that we all are doing all the time. Does anyone have anything they would like to add before we close?

Molly: This is a question that we get sometimes, "how to get involved?" If this is something that you are interested in diving into more, I think the best advice I could give is to read a lot, read abolitionist work and then just start doing it. Just start doing the thing where you are at with the resources and skills that you have. That is how Nancy, Karrie and I got started. We did not really know what we were doing. We got majorly sidetracked because of the pandemic. We were doing stuff that we never envisioned was possible. Just get started where you are. Do not be afraid to make mistakes. Learn from everything that you are doing. There is a place for you in the movement.

Serenity: I feel deeply grateful to be in this space with such brilliant and beautiful humans. It is such an affirming experience. This is exactly where all of us are supposed to be. The circle is open for other people to join us and we look forward to being able to build more connections because we learn so much from each other. We are doing beautiful things and I am excited to see what the future is going to bring for us all through this work. I do not have anything profound to say, only that I am incredibly grateful. I love the way you are bringing up, Molly, how to get involved in the movement. I think of myself as an amplifier of sorts. I repeat the words that really smart people string together, like the people in this Zoom. I repeat them, I get used to how the words sound in my mouth, how the ideas come together, and I amplify the good work that is being done by others by sharing out with my students and with my communities. In this sense, I believe repetition to be an important part of the work of abolition.

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