Anti-Colonial Abolition: International Context

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ABOUT THE CONTIBUTORS

Sheri Pranteau is a First Nations woman born in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She is currently serving a life sentence. Sheri served approximately 17 years inside and has an incredible amount of lived experience under her belt. She has been free on full parole for over 10 years and is a great mother to a 9-year-old son. She is also a senior member of the Indigenous Support Workers Project (ISWP) – a grassroots organization based in Montréal, Québec. Sheri makes fried/baked bannock before her shifts and she shares this with her homeless Indigenous community members. ISWP provides street level assistance, mental health wellness through communication and acknowledgment. She is also newly employed with Canadian Associations of Elizabeth Fry Societies as their Advocacy Liaison and is continually working hard to move forward in her life in the best and most healthy way possible.

Tracey McIntosh, MNZM, is Ngāi Tūhoe, mother and grandmother and a Professor of Indigenous Studies and Co-Head of Te Wānanga o Waipapa (School of Māori Studies and Pacific Studies) at the University of Auckland. She was the former Co-Director of Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga New Zealand's Māori Centre of Research Excellence. Her recent research focused on incarceration (particularly of Māori and Indigenous peoples), along with issues pertaining to poverty, inequality and social justice. She recognizes the significance of working with those that have lived experience of incarceration and marginalization, and acknowledges them as experts of their own condition. She has a strong interest in the interface between research and policy.

Thalia Anthony is a Professor of Law at the University of Technology Sydney. She is a teacher, researcher, mother, activist, abolitionist, and proud Cypriot who lives and works on the stolen land of the Eora Nation. Her research focuses on the colonial legacy and systemic racism in legal and penal institutions. Her books *Indigenous People, Crime and Punishment* and *Decolonising Criminology* highlight the harms endured by First Nations people from the penal-colonial state. She works with local Aboriginal

organizations such as Deadly Connections and Aboriginal Legal Services to strengthen sites of resistance and further self-determination.

Vicki Chartrand is a Mama and Associate Professor in the Sociology Department at Bishop's University, Quebec located on unceded Abenaki territory and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa located on unceded Algonquin and Anishinabek territory. Her work centres on collaborating for and with women and children, Indigenous communities, and people in prison. Pm8wzowinnoak Bishop's kchi adalagakidimek aoak kzalziwi w8banakii aln8baïkik.

ROUNDTABLE

The discussion below reflects the first part of the two-part NAISA virtual conference roundtable (14 and 21 June 2021). This roundtable explores the international context of anti-colonial abolitionism across the lands known as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (Aotearoa). A second roundtable, which also appears in this special issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, articulates an anti-colonial abolitionism approach within a local context of the Prairies region in the land known as Canada. We start by honoring the First Nations people of these lands, pay our respects to Elders past and present, and recognize that sovereignty was never ceded by First Nations peoples across these lands.

Vicki: Given what has been happening on the world scene with the international movement of Black Lives Matters, we have been hearing a lot more conversation around abolition. For me, I have been involved in abolition thinking and organizing for over 20 years, but many do not know what abolition is. These panels are a good opportunity to be a part of the abolition conversation and understandings, which is more than bringing down carceral or policing systems, but also building community. First, what is abolition and anti-colonial abolitionism to each of us?

Tracey: For one, abolition is about what it is to be human and what our responsibilities are to each other. That is a really important element of abolition, particularly anti-colonial abolition, that allows us to really think much more closely and much more strongly about our relationships with

each other, with our lands, with our waters and with our people – people that we love, people that we protect, and those people who have been harmed and who have gone on and harmed others. An important element of abolition is thinking about ways of creating a space where everyone can flourish. Abolition sits in a space, that does not ignore harm, but recognizes what produces and reproduces harm. Abolition is an emancipatory project.

To have true abolition is creating the conditions for a just society. For me, abolition sits within a space of decarceration, especially from prisons, but also from all carceral spaces. I think 20 years ago, people could hardly imagine the possibility of it. Prisons are such a monolithic element of our social lives. As Angela Davis (2003) said, we can't imagine a world without them, but today more people understand that you cannot incarcerate away racism. You cannot incarcerate poverty. You cannot incarcerate any social problem.

Sheri: I think about abolition in terms of the government sitting at the table with us and honouring the land and treaties that they have signed – that they would invest in the communities and clean water, access to housing, and programs, rather than millions upon millions of dollars to lock us away. I know firsthand because I sat in prison for close to 19 years and it is always a struggle. It is just insanity where the cycle is always the same with the idea that we "just need more prisons". We need to put more money into more prisons and more guards and more this, and it just continues. If they invested in the communities with programs, healing, water and wellness, we would be able to take care of ourselves, our own communities, our own people.

Before the white people came, we had our trading system. Nobody was homeless. Nobody was hungry. Everybody had their place. Everybody had their life. Yes, we fought amongst ourselves. We fought each other. But we lived sustainably. Our communities and our tribes, we survived and lived well. Then the Europeans came. And with them came alcohol, guns, and destruction of everything that we had. They did not discover anything. They just invaded.

Vicki: I am reminded of Art Solomon (1990), an Ojibwe man who would fight for his people in the prisons, who was quoted saying "We were not perfect, but we had no jails, we had no taxes… no wine and no beer, no old peoples' homes, no children's aid society, we had no crisis centres. We had a philosophy of life based on the Creator. We had our humanity".

Sheri: Right. You hear it in the in the songs, the stories and the teachings. Our people have to fight just to be human, to be recognized as human, especially as women who are murdered and disappeared on a daily basis. The problems will not just go away without a massive change like with abolition.

Thalia: I am really hearing Sheri. I think when we talk about abolition, we bring a different set of values. We bring values that are strengths-based. We believe in our humanity. We believe that people are good. We believe that we have the power to create a society where we can care about one another. The opposite to abolition is oppression that create humans as deficits who we can harm and even kill. Oppression also manifests in terms of the ongoing stealing of land, destruction of cultural heritage, the stealing of this nation's children.

Abolition requires shifting these ways and is necessarily anti-colonial because colonization sets up and reproduces these beliefs and power structures. Like Vicki noted, before colonization, there were no prisons. There were other ways in which harms were dealt with, but prisons were not a part of the response. Indigenous societies flourished and, in Australia, flourished for tens of thousands of years in the harshest of conditions. Abolition is about displacing all forms of prisons, which take many forms in colonial societies, not only penal institutions, but also child protection and mandatory mental health facilities.

Thalia: Many forms of oppression need to be unsettled. It does not just start and end at the prison gates, but the prison is a real signifier of how we dehumanize people. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) refers to it as "white patriarchal sovereignty" that orders the hierarchy of humans in settler colonies. We had a doubling of the rates of Indigenous incarceration over the last decade in Australia. First Nations women make up over a third of the female prison population, and yet only one percent of the adult population. The women tend to be criminalized for minor things like traffic offending, offensive language and breaching a justice order.

Despite First Nations women going in for relatively short amounts of time, it can disrupt their whole lives and the lives of their families. It prevents women from growing up the next generation and passing on culture. A major source of concern are the numbers of First Nations women who are dying in custody and the circumstances in which they die reflect a horrific neglect on the part of the system. For example, one woman was

not treated for septicemia because she was stereotyped as a drug addict. Another woman was arrested for being intoxicated on a train and left to die in a police station, while, on that same night, a non-indigenous woman who was picked up by the police was escorted home by the police and not even charged. The only way I think to change this system is to abolish it.

Tracey: In New Zealand, our Maori women make up sixty-three per cent of the prison population. Those between the ages of 16 and 25 are even greater up to 80-90 percent. I want to read a poem that helps contextualize these numbers. It was written by a woman who goes by the pseudonym of Maia who was arrested at 14 years of age, convicted at 15 years of age and entered the adult system at 16 years of age.

She Screams.
She screams heartbreak and betrayal.
Yet no one even stopped.
She screams heartache and capture.
Yet she was instantly dropped.
She screams of mourning mothers whose eyes are red from crying.
She screams her soul of departure to avoid the fear of dying.
She screams for honesty and love to cherish forever.
She screams to God to please keep my mind together.
She screams of lost hope and searches for one to confide.
She screams for a shield that she can - so she can run and hide.
She screams for answers and treasures to seek and find.
She screams for acceptance only to lose her mind.
She screams of blinded pain that everyone's too busy to hear.
She screams silently and drowns in a thousand tears.
She screams with high pitch, enough to make you deaf.
She screams and screams and screams till she has no breath.
She screams with hurt and suffering, to some that may seem violent.
She screams for an ending to her misery and torment.
She screams louder and louder till her heart turns to stone.
She screams out loud, but quietly holds it in.
She screams for acceptance for her committed sin.
She screams her heart out so she can finally speak.
She says she felt it all, too strong to be weak.

Vicki: What a powerful poem. Thank you for sharing that with us Tracey. I cannot echo enough the importance and centrality of those with the lived expertise to abolition, and how much we all learn and benefit from listening to folks like Sheri and the people who write that kind of poetry. It is not a coincidence that where we are talking from – New Zealand, Australia, and Canada – that we are all seeing the same systemic criminalization of Indigenous people across the land. As Thalia tells us, we cannot simply reform the system. Since the inception of the system, it has been reform after reform, after reform. This ongoing onslaught of attention and energy only reaffirms and reinforces what the systems does and what it has been designed to do.

In Canada, since the 1960s when we started to see a move to "Indigenize" the system to address overarching incarceration disparities, we have only seen an ongoing increase in the incarceration of Indigenous people every single year, while the general prison population has been decreasing. The idea of reform is a dead end.

Tracey: Moana Jackson, a prominent Maori legal scholar and philosopher, who has been working in the space of abolition for almost his entire life, talks about how the colonial imperative and the carceral imperative are so entwined. For abolition, it is important that we also address and seek to retrace state, colonial, neocolonial, legislative, structural, political, economic, cultural, institutional, religious, and collective forms of violence. When I think about Moana Jackson who talks about both the colonial imperative to dispossess, to extract, to shift, to move, to take, we also see that very much within the carceral imperative too, which is to segregate, to take away, to extract, and then to concentrate people in a particular way.

We have this incredible social cost that constantly reproduces harm, but it is also fully funded. So, I call it fully funded failure. When you think about the costs of our system in New Zealand, where we spend 1.2 billion dollars to lock up our people every year, when you compare that level of expenditure to what we put into our treaty settlements, where the treaty settlements allow people to flourish, to allow them to have their mana motuhake – their self-determination, their self-determining ways of being – but instead we see this significant investment in failure and that it's always the same people who bear the burden of that failure.

Vicki: This brings us to our next topic of how we came to abolition or, perhaps, how it found us. For me, having grown up in abuse it was not hard to grasp how the prison was an extension of the same kind of abuse I experienced. It is an absolute control over your life – the dispossession from who you are and what you believe. It was not a big stretch for me to understand how interpersonal violence is a continuum of what we see in terms of state violence, where all aspects of your life are dominated. In my anti-violence work, I went into prisons and learnt from folks like Sheri along the way who taught me tremendous amounts about this tendency for us to segregate and see people who have been criminalized as somehow different, but also learnt about humanity there.

Sheri: I come from a very, I guess you could say, broken family. I learned in my adult life that my grandparents were a part of the residential schools and they suffered. Horrific stories and horrific treatment, and they did not get any type healing from their experiences. And while they were raising me, there was a lot of alcoholism. There were always cases upon cases of alcohol bottles, empties and drinking at my house. My entire family liked to drink. I grew up very closely with one older sister as my other siblings were much older than us and they were not always around.

I realized later that the older siblings were already locked up, already doing time for different situations. Eventually, my grandparents would take me to prisons to see my older siblings. I would visit two different jails, one for the women to see my older sister and then the men's prison to visit one of my oldest brothers. While we would visit my oldest brother, I would also see my cousins. And sadly, in some ways, it was like a family gathering. When I think back and I recollect on all these things, how I was raised, how my grandparents were treated, the alcoholism, the violence, the abuse, it made me very cold as a young child – I became cold to authority. I became cold to my family, their alcoholism, and violence, and their inability to care properly for me and my siblings – there was nothing. It was a lot of hiding behind a bottle, hiding behind anger, hiding behind violence.

At one point I was a part of Child Family Services. Every time ran away, they would catch me and take me right back into the home that I ran from. And when I kept running away, they put me in a lockup with the nuns and the sisters. They took me out of one situation and put me in another situation where now I have these nuns, more people wearing crosses, and they are

praying and forcing me to stay. Everywhere I went, there was just violence, cops and institutions.

And it pushed me. It pushed me into the streets. It pushed me to other street kids. I grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba in an area called the North End. This part of Winnipeg is considered one of the largest reserves in Canada and was also the murder capital of Canada for many years. It is a very violent place, even today. When I went into the streets, I got caught up with other similar kids, in similar situations, similar family lives, similar grandparents, alcoholism, violence. And we banded together. When my family would not have any food in the cupboards, one of our boys would come get us over to their house where they would have food to eat for that day. This was in the early days when the Aboriginal gangs really started up here in Canada and Winnipeg like the Indian posse, Manitoba Lawyers, or the Overlords. We were a bunch of Indigenous kids, separated by different areas of the city, looking to survive, looking for some type of recognition in our own lives and in our own brokenness. As I think and talk more about it, I realize how depressing it is to grow up in all that craziness, and all that poverty, and all that abuse, and all that violence. Then add to all of that, the police would come with force and that only resulted in more violence. And they take you away to places where there is only more dysfunction. And one day, they took me away.

They took me. Rather than helping in any way, they just took me and they locked me up. They locked me up when I was very young and they said that there was no hope or prospects for me. And this was all based on a crime that I did not even commit. I was in this type of lifestyle – organized crime, street gangs and violence. I was well respected because I was considered solid and I just did not talk; I did not want my family involved or my brothers and sisters of the gangs. I was running. I was trying to survive. You hear a lot about exploitation from gangs, human trafficking and terror, but I never experienced it like that. I never experienced the exploitation of being put out onto the streets to make money for my brothers and sisters. They raised me to be able to defend myself and to stand up, and not to accept the abuses and things that were going on behind closed doors, particularly within the system.

It was those same gang members and people that when I got thrown into the system that told me to write everything down. Every request that you have, write it down. If you have a problem or if somebody said no to you on

a certain date, write it down. Just write everything down. These teachings never came from anyone in authority. Nobody ever gave me guidance or tried to get me out of this situation that I was in.

My coming into abolition was through my experience and treatment. I have been on parole for 11 years. When I was sentenced, I was barred from my city, which means that I was not allowed to go back home. This brought me to Montreal, Quebec when I was released. It was a fresh start, but it took 10 years of trying to have some type of connection with my family. A lot of people have passed away over the years and I have been repeatedly denied returning home. After 21 years, I was allowed to briefly go home last year. I could give so many examples of what brought me to abolition.

I am one of the very few fortunate ones that made it out. Many of our sisters that go inside, they do not make it out. Our spirits are not meant to be incarcerated and we lose so many as a result.

I was a kid. I was a kid when all of this happened. I was not even 18 years old and they just totally screwed my life. It was a lie. It was all a lie. I would observe the requirements and follow my program, but it did not matter. I realized that you cannot trust them. I started reading the law books, all the rules, directives, regulations and legislation. At that point, when the guards would come around, they would have to come with their white gloves. They could not just do what they wanted – I knew my rights. In the end, that is how I survived. I had to educate myself.

Vicki: That is amazing. We often see those kinds of resistances and refusals get cast as defiance and non-compliance.

Thalia: Thank you so much for sharing that with us Sheri. It really got to my heart. With abolition, I do not think I came to it. I think it came to me. I grew up in a family that was cynical and critical of police, prisons, and child protection. I never knew anything else. My family were activists for generations. I did not have to unlearn any trust in the system. Maybe it is why I became an academic and teacher, as I find there is so much unlearning that students need to open their minds, and it also allows me to constantly learn. The flipside of having grown up with a distrust of the system is that it got me caught up in the criminal justice system, having also been criminalized, arrested and sentenced for involvement in protests, although thankfully not imprisoned. I am always aware that I could wake up one day and not be free. That boundary between people inside and outside has never

been that clear for me. I have never seen people in prison as any different to me. I think our situation with COVID-19 has also increased our awareness of the connections between the people inside and outside, and the risks to life for everyone when we don't care for people inside. We need to share more of our experiences like yours, Sheri. It is important to understand that we are a part of a common humanity. Prisons do not just affect those inside – they impact all of us.

I learnt more about abolition and the language of abolition through some amazing First Nations women like Tabitha Lean and Nayuka Gorrie in Australia, but also Moana Jackson and Tracey McIntosh have helped to give me a vocabulary to be a part of the campaigns. Deb Kilroy from Sisters Inside in Australia has been an absolute trailblazer in the Australian space for abolition and builds on the resounding contribution of Angela Davis.

There is a certain way in which abolitionists must be cautious in how we frame our demands. We also need to do so in ways that helps develop an understanding of abolition that is not something all about destruction, but focused on creation. I see the need for abolition as becoming more and more powerful. I have worked with Aboriginal women in prison who talk not only about the prison as being a threat to their lives, but the ongoing shadow of prison. Like Sheri says, one woman, after she left, told me that it did not matter how hard she tried, her criminal history always follows her around. It never goes away. The way that prison shapes the lives of women and men, by demonizing them and preventing them from fulfilling their potential, shows how diminished society becomes by imprisoning people.

Tracey: As an Indigenous woman, I know that there is not one Māori in New Zealand that does not have some association with the prison. There is not one of us that does not have family who have been imprisoned, whether we are looking backward or whether we are looking forward. Like Thalia, I have been blessed in terms the family that I have been brought up where I was surrounded by love. My parents had very progressive politics. There also was not the same sort of unlearning to do, but it was just something that consistently presented itself, even when I was very young. I think I have always been in that space. I have had this incredible opportunity of working and volunteering with people in prisons and particularly in the women's space for a long period of time. I really benefitted from the generosity of others who have given me their knowledge, and given so freely and so

openly, often where they are rarely beneficiaries of the knowledge that they impart, the expertise that they impart.

A concept that I draw on is Mokopunatanga. Mokopuna are grandchildren and mokopunatanga is the belief that we must live in a time where our grandchildren's grandchildren will flourish. It is our upholding – our mokopuna. It is upholding our grandchildren, those that we will not see. One of the things I often talk about is the way that prisons do not just colonize our lands and people, they colonize our futures. And I think that Mokopunatanaga is the response to that. It is thinking about our grandchildren's grandchildren – those that will not be around. For this to happen, we must work from a space of hope. When I was listening to Sheri, and just recognizing that space between hopelessness and hope, I know that all of us in this space that we are now in, to recognize the space and sharing, and the knowledge that Sheri, you have been imparting, is a powerful knowledge that creates the conditions for change. There is something powerful about that type of expert witnessing that opens-up spaces for others, even though in doing it, the emotional costs are still so high. So really, it is just that recognition of the way that knowledge can create the conditions of change, that it's stories, it's stories with analysis, it's stories with evidence.

Abolition feels like it has always been there, but it constantly enhanced. When I am with people like Debbie Kilroy, it is enhanced. When I see our young rangatahi, our young people – Julia Whaipooti, Emmy Rākete – these really young people who are working in that space, it is enhanced. All of these young people working in abolition now and who have a level of creativity, thought, and recognition of the need of lived expertise. I would like to read another poem by a beautiful young woman who takes the name of Maia. She has a life sentence, but she has now been two years released. She has only last week become a mother of twin boys and we hope that those beautiful boys will be the disrupters of this intergenerational violence. This poem is in response to the poem "The Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou (1994).

A time to be caged and a time to be numb,
Her beauty and song unheard of by some.
A cry of joy or purely from pain,
She'll wake up and sing again.
No doubt of how her voice will be heard,
Whether she sings or shouts,
She is still a caged bird.

Sung with volume as days pass her by,
But how will she know what is beyond the sky?
Is it to be happy?
Why the caged bird sings unaware of what her life may bring?
Or is it a greater power that locks her cage?
Someone with fury and someone with rage?

The joys of the songs of freedom and flying are caged in sorrow and belong and dying.
Soft warmth of sun born in mists of rain, sang herself to sleep to try and hide the pain.
Now I know why I sang and what pulled me through.
I question the system, but they had not a clue.
Because deep in mai heart it had a beat.
The wind blew hard, but I got back on mai feet.
I can sing through the pain and all that they dealt.
I would rather be caged than to never have felt.
In the cage, grew old and fell apart.
It gave me a journey, a journey of heart.

Vicki: This is a brilliant poem. Thank you again for sharing Tracey. I wish we had endless time to keep this space alive. I love these panels because we can generate so much synergy and creativity for us to share and grow our understandings. To wrap-up, I would like to talk a little about the perils and possibilities that COVID-19 has created for abolition. Certainly, it has exposed and heightened the inherent violence and problems with the system. But at the same time, it has also created possibilities for action that we would have never thought possible, like large scale decarceration in some areas of the globe, including the provinces of Canada. And even now, there are not higher documented rates of crime. As has been noted throughout our talk, abolition is about creating, growing and building.

Tracey: One of the things that COVID-19 has shown us in possibilities of what we thought impossible is adequate income and benefits. Virtually overnight, we put in a wage subsidy for all of those could not work in New Zealand. This shows that you can use the levers in very different ways, including other crises like those associated with the prison. Video was also

never used to increase access to family and support, and that was implanted overnight. I think what it is showing us are the incredible levels of social change that we can do, and the way that communities themselves can support and help themselves. Think of the possibilities when you have local knowledge and resources within a community to meet the issues where and when social harm happens. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) says, "It is not the pursuit of the impossible. It is the pursuit of the possible". When we think about these problems as intractable, we think that it is impossible. COVID-19 opened us up to possibilities at a regulatory and personal level – a macro and micro level – that we can create quite different societies. And I think this can gives us great hope in the space of evolution.

Sheri: I don't know really what to say at this point, except that Tracey, I am a fan. I admire that you have your language and that you use it. I wish I had that. I never spoke my language growing up. I was spoken at, and I think my grandparents were also spoken at, but we lost our language along the way. Well, they did not lose the language. I think what happened is that the communication was lost. More like taken away. You need communication to have a meaningful connection with people. Our Indigenous people and First Nations people suffered without communication, the loss of culture, identity, and language. It is very heartbreaking. I am happy to be a part of this today. Anything that Vicki is on board with too because she's powerful, powerful people. And when I say powerful, I mean pure in their heart, but that fierceness that they carry, that pride, the justice and voices that they want to bring forward, I also admire that. That's one of the reasons that I continue to put each of my feet in front of each other and I keep moving forward. And I do not want to give up, and even in the hardest of days and hardest of times, when I do not think that I am worthy, I get up and I am still grateful for each and every day. Everything that I have been through that has brought me to where I am today.

My grandmother used to always wake me up and say, "you know, we all have the same, same day, the same time. Get up". She had a lot of disabilities and with all her stuff, she would just keep going. It makes me think that, even in the hardest of times, I have to get up and appreciate the day and be grateful and, you know, we could change the world one day at a time. I believe that if we keep pushing that we will heal each other. And if we take care of our women, I believe that the rest of the world will follow.

Vicki: Very well said Sheri. I like the idea of moving just one foot in front of the other is how we will change our world.

Thalia: I want to say thank you and just echo what has been said. We have seen a lot of change in the last year and change can happen quickly. And when it happens, we need to be there to make sure that it is pushed in a direction that elevates the voices of people like Sheri who are on the ground. I think that change will happen and we have a responsibility – we all do. I think bringing life and bringing breath to people who have been denied life and breath will make us all so much richer.

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