

On Abolition as Praxis of Librarianship

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On Abolition as a Praxis of Librarianship

In the Spring of 2020, uprisings and protests of the police and prison erupted in response to the racial injustice experienced by Black Americans, especially as in the cases of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd who were both murdered by on duty police officers. This unrest led to a political and cultural climate where serious discussions of police and prison abolition could take place – a project that has been mobilized by the likes of Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Miriam Kaba, Dylan Rodríguez, Robin D.G. Kelley, Fred Moten, and so many other activists for over two decades now. Calls to *defund the police*, a slogan for the divestment of funds from police departments into other services that promote community safety and well-being such as schooling and social services, have begun to shape conversations at city council budget meetings in both the USA and Canada.

As these conversations continue to happen in the public sphere, I think that it is important for librarians to become acquainted with the criticisms of policing and incarceration that come from abolition. I say this not only because divestment from policing and incarceration could result in investment in libraries, but rather, because the library has various ties to the *prison industrial complex* (PIC), a term that emphasizes the ways in which the carceral system is shaped economic and political structures and ideologies, especially in their racist forms (Davis, 2003).

Abolition is a rich tradition that stems from a long history of Black radicalism and Indigenous decolonial praxis that has always connected policing and incarceration to the building of a white supremacist nation state (Rodríguez, 2019). In library and information studies (LIS) scholarship, there has been many recent calls for a more thorough analysis of race in librarianship that would require library anti-racist praxis to move beyond equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives towards projects that can completely dismantle white supremacy in library

institutions at a structural level (Hathcock, 2015; Hudson, 2017; Matthews, 2020; Sierpe, 2019). The goal of this paper is to justify the necessity of an abolitionist praxis in librarianship, especially in the Canadian context, and to explore some of the potentials of this praxis. To do so, I structure this paper into five main sections. The first section examines the ways in which librarianship is tied to the PIC by reviewing some of the LIS literature on the subject of policing and prisons. The second section discusses the general history of policing and incarceration from a critical materialist standpoint. The third section recounts the history of policing and incarceration in Canada as processes of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness. The fourth section discusses the tradition of abolition, as well as some important concepts that could be relevant to librarianship. The fifth and final section argues for the necessity of an abolitionist praxis of social justice/community-led librarianship, and some proposals for what such praxis would entail, including the abolition of policing in library spaces, the adoption of a prisoner-led librarianship as a framework for prison libraries, and the transition from institutional community-led libraries to deinstitutionalized community-based libraries.

In writing this paper, I feel that it is important to acknowledge my positionality as a white settler on the lands that are now known as Canada. In writing this paper, I have attempted uplift the voices of Indigenous and Black scholars wherever possible. In sections of the paper where I am employing my own arguments, I have in good faith attempted to apply the various principles that come from the tradition of abolition, as far as I understand them. I acknowledge that abolition is a tradition that I have little connection with and understand that the work of abolition is not accomplished in writing papers but rather through grassroots organizing in community with other abolitionists. That I have not written this paper within this context is a severe limitation of my ability to interpret abolitionist praxis and apply its analyses to librarianship.

Moreover, I would like to acknowledge that the content of this paper is incredibly incomplete, not only for the reasons that I have outlined above, but because the history of policing and incarceration in Canada acts along various other lines of oppression beyond settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness that I have not discussed here. Indeed, any complete analysis of policing and incarceration in Canada would also need to consider the oppression that other people of colour, the LGBTQ2S+ community, folks with disabilities, the poor, and intersections of these communities face due to the Canadian carceral system. Even on the important topics of this history that I do discuss here, I feel that much has been excluded.

My writing on anti-Blackness in Canada is greatly indebted to Robyn Maynard's fantastic book *Policing Black Lives* (2017). Writing this paper has demonstrated to me the great deficit of Black studies in Canadian academia – as Maynard (2017) writes, there is a “telltale absence of Black Studies departments in most Canadian universities” (p. 18). The moral of this absence holds true for Canadian LIS scholarship as well.

The Relationship of the Library to the Police and Prisons

In this section, I demonstrate some of the ways that libraries are very explicitly tangled up in the PIC. To do so, I account for the ways in which policing and prisons have been discussed in the LIS literature through a summary of Robinson's (2019) categorization and critique of the common frameworks of library policing, and a look at Finlay & Bates' (2019) desistance framework for librarianship in prisons.

Police in Libraries

At my time of writing, I am enrolled in a course that had an assigned reading from Johnson's *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management* (2018), where I was shocked to read the following statement:

Theft and mutilation are criminal acts. Libraries should work with their governing body and local law enforcement agencies when theft is suspected. Notifying other libraries, local book sellers, manuscript dealers, rare and out-of-print book dealers, and missing-book blogs and electronic lists of thefts is useful and has led to the identification and capture of repeat offenders. (p. 224)

This statement illuminates that for Johnson, security, especially that of library property, is tied to the institution of policing. Robinson (2019) suggests that libraries have, in general, adopted “a conservative and uncritical approach to the security and policing of libraries”. To clarify this analysis, Robinson suggests that the approaches to security in the LIS literature may be captured by three categories: the *liability*, *security consultant*, and *First Amendment* frameworks of security.

The *liability framework* “tends to view safety and security as a holistic endeavour” that emphasizes the need for “security infrastructure” such as “alarms that can be installed to improve security”, and the adoption of a security culture “which encourages library and security staff to monitor certain patron types who are deemed most likely to exhibit ‘suspicious activity’” (Robinson, 2019). The issue with this framework, as Robinson (2019) discusses, is that who is often deemed as suspicious or criminal may not in fact be a reflection of their actions, but rather criminal categories that have been imposed on their being, as is often the case with BIPOC, poor, or gender non-conforming folks. Thus, one is left to question what is being achieved by this framework, other than a technology of targeted exclusion.

The *security consultant framework* relies on the provision of security measures and training by external bodies, especially by the police (Robinson, 2019). In this framework, it is viewed that the presence of police in libraries should become normalized, to the point of having

staff areas open to officers that come into the library space. It is a framework that acknowledges and then promptly ignores the tension between police and library values. As Robinson (2019) writes,

[t]hough it is clear what police officers stand to gain from such a relationship, it is unclear how this would benefit library workers, not to mention the impression this increased closeness could have on patrons' perception of intellectual freedom and privacy in libraries.

The *First Amendment framework*¹ strives to “balance the rights of the individual against the rights of the majority” (Robinson, 2019). This framework identifies that while police and security guard presence in libraries may lead to the discomfort of minority patron groups, a lack of police or security guard presence may lead to discomfort for majority patron groups. Though alternatives to police are found in this framework, such as partnerships with public health workers, de-escalation training for library staff, and programs that allow staff to develop close relationships with the patrons, a generally uncritical approach to policing is adopted in this framework (Robinson, 2019).

Robinson's (2019) article concludes with an account of various studies that indicate that the function of the police and security, especially in public spaces, is towards the purpose of excluding people who are racialized, poor, or more generally deemed undesirable by the majority. Robinson (2019) suggests that working closely with social workers and marginalized

¹ While this framework has its roots in US constitutionalism, it nonetheless is an ideological view that informs Canadian librarianship by way of the American Library Association's hegemony of Canadian professional library practice, through accreditation and other means.

communities to manage library security is the path towards the creation of libraries as “safe and welcoming places for all people,” and to more generally transform “the way public space is used and managed”. The rest of this paper will clarify this picture using critical and historical studies of policing, rather than social scientific accounts, ultimately allowing for a reframing of Robinson’s criticisms in an abolitionist framework.

Libraries in Prisons

In the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) commissioner’s directive *Educational Program and Services for Inmates* (2017), it is stated that library services must be available at all institutions, and that these services are provided with resources. Note that the CSC does not require all federal carceral institutions to have a library, although many do (Ings & Joslin, 2011). The roles of the librarian under this directive are to support the institutional programming of the carceral institution, towards the purpose of “facilitat[ing] inmates’ reintegration by increasing education skills” (Correctional Service Canada, 2017). Indeed, a number of reports from the 1980’s that were commissioned by the CSC and carried out by librarians found that library support is essential to a number of ‘correctional’ programs, and that the prison library is not a discrete entity within the carceral institution, but rather an integrated part of its assembly (Ings & Joslin, 2011).

In work coming from the United Kingdom, Finlay & Bates (2019) argue that although prison libraries make significant contributions to the lives of those incarcerated, the role of the prison library has been undertheorized. They suggest that by framing prison librarianship within a model that draws from the interlocking criminological theories of *desistance*, pedagogical *theories of informal learning*, and *critical librarianship*, prison librarians are given a foundational criterion for which to base their service upon, allowing for stronger social scientific

research in this area.

The most emphasized and significant aspect of Finlay & Bates' (2019) model for prison librarianship is that of *desistance* – a criminological process by which one who was once criminal becomes non-criminal (Graham & McNeill, 2017; Weaver, 2019). The theories of desistance are distinct from theories of rehabilitation and correction due to their theoretical shift from studying *what* causes desistance to a study of *how* desistance occurs (Finlay & Bates, 2019). Thus, instead of asking *what types of library services lead to rehabilitative outcomes*, the librarian grounded in the theory of desistance is led to ask the broader and more insightful question of *what it is about library service that leads to these outcomes*. The insight from desistance theory that is most strongly taken up by Finlay & Bates (2019) is the *strengths-based approach* that is “based around supporting an individual’s potential for positive change and the ability to take control of their lives” (p. 124).

Similar views are taken up by *informal theories of learning*, in which learners are not forced through a compulsory and prescriptive curriculum designed by educators; rather, educators create an environment in which learners may explore their own particular interests and needs through learning (Finlay & Bates, 2019). This form of learning not only leads to outcomes such as critical reasoning and self-confidence, but it also avoids the traditional pedagogies that may exacerbate negative self-images due to negative experiences that many people who are incarcerated lived through. Thus, the decentering of curriculum and the recentering of the learner is entirely analogous to the shift that desistance theory makes away from rehabilitation theory.

Likewise, the scholarly activities of *critical librarianship*, in its focus on power structures and the rights of people of above all other professional considerations, leads the librarian to question their authority and instead to validate the knowledge and experiences of the library’s

users (Finlay & Bates, 2019). In a critical library framework, the library thus becomes a space where patrons can partake in self-directed learning and transformation. This view of librarianship interacts with the two above theories, as all seek to empower the subjects of their framework through similar means, mainly by stripping power from the authority and creating environments in which one can read, learn, and develop themselves freely according to their interests.

The desistance-based framework outlined by Finlay & Bates (2019) seems to offer a humanistic project for the prison library to align itself with, especially within the context of a violent institution such as the prison. That said, I believe that there are two issues of critical importance that this framework leaves unaddressed, which may serve to undermine it. The first issue is that this framework undertheorizes the concept of criminality, that is, it does not ask what power structures underly the category of criminality – an issue that is commonly taken up by critics of desistance theory (Weaver, 2019). My second issue with this framework is that it ignores the institutional shaping of the library by the force of white supremacy, as discussed by both de Jesus (2014) and Ettarh (2018). In awe of their vocation (Ettarh, 2018), Finlay & Bates (2019) are consumed by the assumptive contradictions that exist between the library and the prison, while failing to consider the greater societal forces that allow both to take shape. I contend that a theory of the prison library that does not address these criticisms is inevitably at odds with the tradition of abolition, a point that I will return to in later sections.

Critical History of Policing and Incarceration

In this section, I discuss the world historical origins of policing and incarceration from a critical viewpoint. In doing so, I lay a material foundation by which we can understand the connection of these two institutions to racial capitalism and settler-colonialism, especially in Canada. Doing so allows us to critically disengage from the neoliberal ideological construction

of policing and incarceration as necessary institutions for a community's safety, as is required for any useful discussion of the tradition of abolition. This section will be followed by a discussion of policing and incarceration in Canada, where we will connect the critical points of discussion here to the Canadian past and present.

Policing

For the purposes of our discussion here and throughout, I follow Tia Dafnos' (2013) distinction between *policing* and *the police*. While the term *the police* refers to a particular institution that is involved in the activity of *policing* through state-legitimated violence, the term *policing* refers to the production of a social order that allows for the accumulation of capital. The distinction is important to make as it lies not in some *a priori* difference, but rather it clarifies the historical emergence of policing and the police in Europe as distinct phenomena. This section describes this historical emergence as it is described by Mark Neocleous (2000).

Indeed, according to Neocleous (2000), the term police derives from the 15th century French-Burgundian word *policie*, which denoted "the legislative and administrative regulation of the internal life of a community to promote general welfare and the condition of good order ... and the regimenting of social life" (p. 1). *Policie* began to take hold across continental Europe at this time due to the decline of the feudal state. Up to this point, social order was maintained by feudal lords, their agents, as well as the Church; however, as the economic power of the emergent bourgeoisie began to put stress on prices in the new money economy (Mandel, 2002), the old regime collapsed, leading to the emancipation of many serfs from their feudal lords and their eventual migration to urban spaces (Neocleous, 2000). This change in political geography greatly undermined the pre-existent authorities of social order, which required the creation of new forms of authority, namely policing.

Neocleous (2000) traces the origin of policing to its contemporary form in three stages differentiated by the objectives of policing at a given stage. The first stage is as described above, its objective was to create a continuity of social order as the feudal social order was in decline due to the emergence of bourgeois capitalism; activities at this time would include the enforcement of laws that we might now find outdated that would fall in line with the laws upheld by the Church (Dubber, 2005). The second stage of policing marked a shift from the maintenance of social order to the maintenance of the state's economic prosperity, mainly through the policing of markets and trade, as well as the creation of a labouring class from a large population of vagrants (Neocleous, 2000). For example, the prices of the bread market would be policed to ensure stability, or unemployed vagrants would be forcibly moved to work camps where they would 'learn' a work ethic that would eventually proletarianize them. In this way, policing during this second stage was comprehensive, no aspect of civil life was left unpoliced (Dubber, 2005). The third stage and latest stage of policing was in reaction to the second stage. In his famous work on capitalist political economy, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1910) put forth the argument that the state's purpose is to maintain a free-market through which individuals can act freely in accordance with their rational economic self-interest, as it is through this and through this alone that the nation will prosper – so Smith argued. That said, the free-market is not maintained simply by the retreat of state from the political economy; on the contrary, the state plays an active role in the free-market's maintenance by establishing the liberal notion of security, which is to say, security conceived of as liberty of private property (Neocleous, 2000).

That this form of security requires active and enforced establishment lies in the fact that fundamental to liberal capitalism are the class antagonisms that arise due to the system of private

property, which separates one class (the proletariat) from private property. This contradiction of the capitalist epoch that exists between class and property is what gives rise to the third stage of policing, which is directed towards the fabrication of a social order in which private property is secured from the problem of class (Neocleous, 2000); for example, the policing of labour struggles such as the Winnipeg General Strike (Gouldhawke, 2020). It is from this stage of policing that the modern police emerge.

The police in Canada have and continue to perform this function of establishing a social order that maintains the security of private property for the purposes of expanding capital. That said, the police are not the only institution wrapped up in policing. For instance, state funded educational institutions and social work agencies are also actively involved in the creation of a social order that benefits the accumulation of capital (MPD150, 2021). I will return to this Canadian context after the following subsection.

Incarceration

Like the emergence of policing, incarceration as a dominant mode of Western punishment coaligned with the emergence of liberal capitalism. Indeed, as Angela Davis (2003) accounts, the usage of incarceration as a form of punishment required that the individual become “a bearer of formal rights and liberties” (p. 43) Prior to the establishment of these rights, incarceration as a process that strips one of their rights would make little sense, as the structures of domination prior to liberal capitalism gave individuals very few rights to begin with, so even less to take away. In accordance with this, only those who were considered to have these individual rights could sensibly be incarcerated – thus the early history of the prison is largely absent of Indigenous and enslaved peoples, as well as immigrants and married white women (Gilmore, 2007).

Prior to the prison as the state's primary method of punishment², corporal and capital punishment were of central use (Davis, 2003). As Michel Foucault (1995) describes, the punishment of criminality used to be a public spectacle wherein the body of the criminal was killed or tortured, its publicity used as a demonstration of the consequences of disobedience. The transition from corporal to carceral forms of state punishment represented for Foucault not a humanistic intervention into the penal system, but rather a reflection of the need to discipline an individual into a certain way of being, despite their participation in an ostensibly free society. In prison, as well as other carceral institutions, the incarcerated are subjected to disciplinary regimes that direct the disposition and behavior of bodies toward the benefit of those in power.

Thus, the first penitentiaries, especially in North America, were mobilized as a rational means of disciplining unruly bodies through “micro-regulation over labour and economics (the superintendent/wardens), moral instruction and schooling (chaplains), and the health of the body (the surgeon)” (Chartrand, 2019). By these means, it was imagined that punishment of this time would thus create “an army of self-disciplined individuals capable of performing the requisite industrial labor for a developing capitalist system” (Davis, 2003).

As described by Gilmore (2007), this logic of discipline has changed, although artifacts of it still remain in our political consciousness through the theories of the retributive, deterrent, and rehabilitative prison. The retributive prison's function is to shock those incarcerated by their lack of freedom, leading them to fear being recommitted following release, resulting in a change

² The usage of the term *state* here is to specify the type of punishment I am referring to. I would be remiss to fail to acknowledge the other forms of violent punishment that were enacted against BIPOC folks and white women at this time.

of behaviour. The deterrent prison's function is to dissuade folks from behaving in ways that may land them in prison, for fear of a loss of freedom. The rehabilitative prison's function is to gather up those whose behaviours are problematic, and to transform this to an acceptable behaviour through learning and the acquisition of skills (Gilmore, 2007).

That said, Gilmore (2007) makes the case that the modern expansion of the prison system – especially in the geopolitical space of her analysis, California – has in reality adopted a function of incapacitation, which simply strives to dislocate troublemakers from their community into a space where they can no longer make trouble. The opulence of this form of prison has its roots in the politico-economic crises of the 1970's that led to the decline of the post-war Keynesian welfare state and the emergence of the neoliberal austerity state. As Gilmore (2007) argues, the recession that is at the root of this crisis of governance led to a surplus of finance capital, land, labour, and state capacity, a convergence of surpluses that provided the grounds for the construction and filling of unprecedented amounts of new prisons. Indeed, while financial capital, lands, and labour sat stagnant due to the recession, the state lacked the legitimacy to mobilize it through Keynesian social projects like the construction of community centres, schools, and housing, despite having the capacity for such projects. Thus, a new political strategy emerged where politicians rallied against crime (which had been in decline up to that point) as the ultimate source of social woes. The solution offered was the expansion of criminalization and the prison system, which in turn mobilized the previously stagnant surpluses mentioned above, all the while reinforcing racial and class social hierarchies (Gilmore, 2007).

Though Gilmore's (2007) analysis should not be taken as doctrine for the Canadian context, it can be seen that the Canadian prison system follows similar patterns to that which Gilmore describes, as I shall demonstrate in the next section.

Policing and Incarceration as Settler-Colonialism and Anti-Blackness in Canada

The history of the Canadian state is a history of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness. This section demonstrates the ways in which policing and incarceration have been a vehicle for these oppressive forces, at the cost of many Indigenous and Black peoples living in what is now known as Canada. But, prior to this demonstration, I would like to clarify what I mean by settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness.

In his work on contemporary forms of Canadian settler-colonial politics, Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) defines the relationship between the Canadian state and the Indigenous peoples whose land Canada lays claim to as a settler-colonial relationship, defined as a particular form of *domination*; that is, it is a relationship where power – in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power – has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority. (p. 6-7)

In following Coulthard's definition, I will show how the Canadian state's use of policing and incarceration has always been and continues to be tied to the facilities of this dispossession.

Anti-Blackness is analyzed here through what Cedric Robinson (2000) calls racial capitalism, an alternative to Marx's economic analysis of the origins of capitalism as a revolution in the modes and relations of feudal production. Robinson (2000) claims that much of the transition to capitalism had to do with the expansion of feudal social orders into political and economic relations, where these feudal social orders are best understood as hierarchies maintained by (racial) differences. Indeed, as Robinson (2000) states: "[r]acism, I maintain, was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has

its genesis in the ‘internal’ relations of European peoples” (p. 2). As Gilmore (2018) might elaborate, “capitalism has always been, wherever it originated – let’s say rural England – a racial system. So it didn’t need Black people to become racial. It was already racial between people all of whose descendants might have become white.” In this way, race is a social construction that is essential to the operation of capitalism, and it is a non-rigid social construction at that – for example, at one point ethnically Italian and Irish people were considered to be non-white (Maynard, 2017). Moreover, it is a social construction that requires “immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies” for its maintenance (Robinson, 2000, p. 4). Thus, anti-Blackness is a construction that allows for the exploitation of those who are socially constituted as Black. In this section, I will also show the ways in which the Canadian state has maintained the social construction of Blackness and consequentially anti-Blackness through both policing and incarceration.

It should be noted that although settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness resemble one another as mechanisms by which racialized people are subjugated and exploited, it should be understood that settler-colonialism and racial capitalism differ by their fundamental logics. The logic of settler-colonialism is essentially *eliminative*, that is, it seeks to destroy Indigenous peoples and their sovereignty through means of genocide or assimilation (Maynard, 2017). On the other hand, the logic of anti-Blackness is *enslaving*, that is, it seeks to construct Black folks as property, or if not as people who are “imprisonable, punishable, and murderable” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). So, although Indigenous peoples and Black folks may both experience massive incarceration rates and police violence, it is important to understand that the path to emancipation for both may be distinct, due to the need to dismantle distinct logics.

To give form to this short summary of the history of policing and incarceration in

Canada, I divide my account into three sections that align with various stages of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness in Canada. The first section will discuss pre-Confederation conceptions of the “Indian problem” and the enslavement of Black folks in the Canadian colonies. The second section will discuss the era of frontier-colonialism and racial segregation that followed this first stage, beginning around the time of Canada’s Confederation. The third and final section will discuss the contemporary era of the politics of recognition and multiculturalism in Canada.

The “Indian Problem” and Black Enslavement

The history of Canada prior to Confederation is often painted with a very white brush, especially in Canadian primary and secondary schools, at least in my own experience. That such a view can be taken of the period in which both the ‘Indian problem’ was conceived and Black people were enslaved is likely due to the unique way that the logics of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness run through the discourse of what is called “Canadian benevolence” by Rinaldo Walcott (2003, p. 44).

The early history of British and French settlement in what is now known as Canada was rife with conflicts that culminated in the so-called French and Indian War (1754-1763), in which British victory secured their position as the dominant colonial power in Canada. During this time, the British government established what was called the British Indian Department in 1755, whose main objective was to secure the military allegiances of Indigenous peoples (Pettit, 2016a). An outcome of this objective was the (illegitimate) 1763 *Royal Proclamation*, which declared that the land belonging to Indigenous peoples west of the British colonies was to be under protection of the British Crown – thus, further settlement of Indigenous lands now required treaty formal treaty agreements between the Crown and the people who held title to the

land under the *Royal Proclamation* (Calloway, 2006).

That said, as continental militarism and the fur-trade waned, the protectionist framing of settler-colonial relations became a hindrance to the overall settler-colonial project. Indeed, the rising costs of protectionism could no longer be justified by the British government without the extraction of resources from the land through settlement (Pettit, 2016a). However, “legitimate” settlement still required the use of treaty-making, which at this point turned from a commitment to building relationships between the British government and Indigenous peoples, into a singular event in which Indigenous land titles are ceased (Stark, 2016). Indigenous people’s resistance to these treaties of settlement became construed in 1829 by Major General H.C. Darling as the “Indian problem” of settler-colonialism, a problem that Darling proposed could be solved through a policing project of assimilation and genocide (Pettit, 2016a). The plan would continue to take shape as the colonial government consolidated its powers through Confederation in 1867.

Coinciding with these settler-colonial conflicts and developments is a history of Canadian slavery that few Canadians are aware of, but when they are, they often interpret it as “benign and short-lived” (Maynard, 2017, p. 18). But of course, there is no such thing as “benign” enslavement; slavery is always a violent process that violates the body and humanity of the enslaved (Nelson, 2016). It is true that slavery in Canada looked different from plantation slavery in the American South, the Caribbean, and South America; however, this is due to economic, geographic, and political factors, rather than some form of benevolence (Maynard, 2017).

Settlers in New France and what is now known as Nova Scotia enslaved both Black and Indigenous peoples, where the labour of those enslaved was used domestically, agriculturally, and to construct the infrastructure of new settlements (Maynard, 2017). Slave ownership was common across social strata in pre-Confederation settler society (Whitfield, 2010). All slaves,

regardless of race, were subjected to inhumane conditions that included corporal punishment and gendered sexual violence (Maynard, 2017). Following the French Indian War, the British colonies consolidated and expanded slavery via several influxes of enslaved Black folks to the pre-Confederation colonies (Maynard, 2017). Domestic servitude in British colonial rule led to the isolation of the enslaved from a greater community of slaves, and the intense surveillance of Black folks by white owners (Nelson, 2016). During this period, Black fugitivity was common, as many enslaved Black folks would flee their conditions with ingenuity and courage (Maynard, 2017). Slavery in Canada was abolished in 1833 through the *Slavery Abolition Act* from British Parliament – it included financial compensation for the ‘losses’ of slave owners.

Frontier-Colonialism and Racial Segregation

In 1867, the Dominion of Canada was formed through the federation of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, consolidating Indigenous policies within the auspices of the Canadian government, a moment at which Brian Gettler (2017) claims “the colonial project [was] at its most imperial” (para. 6). An outcome of confederation was the adoption of the *Indian Act* in 1876, which consolidated earlier legislation and reinforced the settler-colonial policies of dispossession, assimilation, and paternalism, notably defining the band governance structure, the notion of “Indian” status, and the introduction of the reserve system – all of which would separate Indigenous peoples from their land and accelerate settlement along the western frontier (Pettit, 2016b).

In 1873, three years prior to the *Indian Act*, the North-West Mounted Police³ (NWMP) were formed as Canada’s first police force. Métis and Cree writer M. Gouldhawke (2020) and

³ Now known as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

Nettelbeck & Smandych (2010) identify the formation of this police force as a means to enforce the illegitimate laws and colonial policies found in the *Indian Act* and its predecessors, and to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands for the purposes of settlement.

The first major operation of the NWMP was to mobilize against the 1885 North-West Resistance, led by the Métis and Cree in what is now known as Saskatchewan. NWMP operations were a resounding failure, and required the intervention of the Canadian military; however, it is clear from events like these the role of the NWMP was that of a paramilitary force (Gouldhawke, 2020). As Turtle Mountain Ojibwe scholar Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2016) has written, police involvement in this event began the construction of Indigenous resistance to settler-colonialism as a criminal act, a legacy that lives on today.

Following the North-West Resistance, NWMP activities began to assume incredibly coercive programs and policies, which included the enforcement of the illegal and carceral pass system that controlled the mobility of Indigenous peoples on the Prairies, and reinforced the reserve system (Gouldhawke, 2020). Invested with magisterial powers that allowed them to both apprehend and sentence people of crimes, the NWMP cleared the way for the development of settler-colonial nation building projects such as the Canadian Pacific railway, while simultaneously suppressing traditional and alternative forms of economic and cultural ways of being during a time that traditional means of subsistence were being degraded by colonial expansion (Nettelbeck & Smandych, 2010). These forms of coercion were accompanied by the system of welfare carried out by the Indian agents, who would only provide welfare to those who had adopted a liberal capitalist ethic of self-reliance and work, especially through the adoption of agricultural economies (Chartrand, 2019; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019).

It is around this time as well that institutional incarceration began to take foot in Canada,

through both the form of both federal penitentiaries and the residential school system. Chartrand (2019) notes that the federal penitentiaries at the time of frontier-colonialism were primarily used to discipline white settlers on the frontier, in a similar manner to that described by Foucault (1995). So, while the penitentiary was certainly used as a means of social control to reform and assimilate white folks to according to the demands of liberal capitalism, the penitentiary was not seen as a tool to be used on Indigenous populations at this time (Chartrand, 2019). On the other hand, Indigenous children were stolen from their homes and taken to residential schools that were run by Christian clergy in an act of cultural genocide that attempted to assimilate future generations of Indigenous peoples within the Canadian body politic (Pettit, 2016c). At these schools, children were stripped of their language and culture, and subjected to violent punishments and solitary confinement (Chartrand, 2019). Many Indigenous youths' lives were lost due to this school system, and the trauma of the residential schools still exists intergenerationally, despite their closure in 1996 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

In the years following the formal abolition of slavery in Canada, representation of Blackness in Canadian society transitioned from that of chattel (property) to criminal, a transition that was in direct continuity with slavery. Indeed, during this period the only public representation of Black folks was through fugitive slave advertisements that would be posted to aid in the recapturing of escaped slaves (Maynard, 2017). These advertisements not only labelled Black folks as criminal *for stealing themselves*, but also as dangerous and deviant, and a contributed to the public culture of policing, surveillance, and incarceration of Black folks (Maynard, 2017).

Although the *Slavery Abolition Act* made Black folks British subjects, and thus entitled

them to the formal rights and freedoms of white folks in Canada, many civil rights and liberties were denied to Black folks (Henry, 2016). Black racial segregation in education, property ownership, employment, public transport, and in commercial establishments was commonplace, and was upheld by both law and the racist practices of white settler society (Henry, 2019). Moreover, the 1910 *Immigration Act* allowed for the government to prevent the immigration of racial minorities, including Black folks, to Canada (Henry, 2019). These segregationist policies, evidently rooted in anti-Blackness, continued to articulate the socially constructed racial differences between Black and white folks.

The pathologizing of the Black-man-as-rapist and sexually promiscuous Black woman tropes were used to justify some of the above policies, as well as to mobilize other developments in the realm of criminal justice, such as rape as capital offense, prostitution laws, and drug laws (Maynard, 2017). Prime Minister John A. McDonald, a year after Confederation, “evoked both the ‘Black rapist’ myth and the threat of lynch mobs to justify keeping rape a capital offence” (Maynard, 2017, p. 41). At the same time, sexual violence committed against Black women was not viewed as a criminal activity due to the view of Black women as sexual objects and was seldom held accountable to the law (Maynard, 2017). That said, Black women’s falsely purported sexuality was deemed a threat to society, and thus prostitution was criminalized in the late 1800’s to control Black and other racialized women’s bodies – it is found that as a result of this law, in Halifax, where the population was only 3% Black, 40% of women convicted of prostitution were Black (Backhouse, 1985). Just as prostitution laws allowed for increased police surveillance and control of Black women, the introduction of drug laws acted in parallel for Black men (Maynard, 2017). Indeed, drug use at this time was tied to sexuality, as it was falsely believed that drugs like opium enabled the promiscuity of white women who would be sexually

taken advantage of by Black men, eventually leading “to the destruction of the white race” (Maynard, 2017, p. 47).

Generally, the expansion of criminal law in Canada was enabled by and contributed to anti-Black racism in Canada. Under these new laws, Black folks in Canada continued to be subjugated and stripped of their freedom by the incarceration and policing that these laws enabled, as evidenced by disproportionate sentences for Black folks, particularly with respect to rates of incarceration (Maynard, 2017).

The Politics of Recognition and Multiculturalism

Indigenous resistance to the coercive and violent tactics of settler-colonialism was incredibly strong, culminating in the formation of the National Indian Brotherhood⁴ (NIB) in 1970, which stood in opposition to the Canadian Government’s 1969 *White Paper*, a policy that would abolish all prior Canadian Indigenous policy, and formally assimilate all Indigenous peoples into Canadian citizenship (Coulthard, 2014). From this opposition emerged the Red Power movement which strongly opposed all explicitly genocidal and assimilative policies. This led to a shift in Canadian Indigenous policy towards a *politics of recognition*, a strategy to recognize various cultural and political rights of Indigenous peoples while still carrying forth various technologies of dispossession, largely through lands claims processes that extinguish various rights to economic development and sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014).

This transition of Indigenous policy towards recognition required a restructuring of the methods of policing that had hitherto been used to coercively culturally assimilate and dispossess Indigenous peoples. For example, Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong (2019) describe that when Indian

⁴ Now known as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN).

agent's administration of welfare systems on reserves was no longer feasible due to Indigenous practices of resistance and refusal, it required a transition to professional social work that was already in use outside of the reserve. While these professionals operated under the guise of humanitarianism that is ideologically tied to social work, their agency was in direct continuity with that of the Indian agents, doing the work of settler-colonialism through the removal of children from their communities,⁵ thus disrupting Indigenous societies, and continuing to create relations of dependence between the State and Indigenous communities through the provision of welfare (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019).

During this time of national transition from overtly paternalistic settler-colonial State methods such as the Indian agent, similar to what followed the abolition of slavery in Canada, the trope of the "Native criminal" was conceived of in the settler consciousness (Chartrand, 2019). As the frontier-colonial project was in decline, penitentiaries were no longer required to control the labour of unruly settlers, instead, a corrective program for rehabilitation was developed that coincided with the expansion of the federal prison system by almost four times between the years 1950-2000, with Indigenous incarceration rates increasing since that time (Chartrand, 2019). In 2020, it was reported that Indigenous peoples make up 30% of Canada's federal prison population despite accounting for 5% of Canada's total population (Zinger, 2020). But, as Nichols (2014) discusses, the critique of the carceral system in Canada transcends these supposed functions, as the carceral system also serves to expand and depoliticize the processes of dispossession by capturing and dislocating Indigenous peoples from their land, thus undermining

⁵ It is estimated that there are three times as many Indigenous children under the care of the state now as compared to under the residential school system.

Indigenous self-determination and governance, including traditional justice systems that are alternative to incarceration.

Policing operations in Canada continued to secure the interests of settler-colonialism through the intense policing of Indigenous peoples' demonstrations of resistance and sovereignty. Since these demonstrations challenge the normalcy of settler-colonialism and the expansion of extractive capital into Indigenous lands, police activities seek to pacify these movements by constructing them as criminal (Stark, 2016), in an attempt to funnel Indigenous politics towards the settler-colonial land claims system that emerged from the colonial politics of recognition (Crosby & Monaghan, 2017). Thus, political actions such as blockades and others that obstruct the flows and accumulation of capital have been rendered illegitimate by Canadian systems of policing (Dafnos, 2013). The policing and pacification of resistance to settler-colonialism is enabled by an intricate system of surveillance that has been deployed by the RCMP, provincial police forces, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Agency, which concentrate their activities on monitoring Indigenous movements, such as Idle No More, to disrupt and delegitimize what is considered by these agencies as dangerous or extremist forms of protest that do not coincide with the settler-colonial imagination (Crosby & Monaghan, 2017; Dafnos, 2013).

Parallel to this over-policing and pacification is the ubiquitous lack of justice that white settlers are held accountable to when they commit acts of (lethal) violence and other criminal forms of harm against Indigenous peoples. Exemplary of this is the RCMP's negligence of the gendered settler-colonial violence committed against Indigenous women and girls in Canada, which was only recently investigated by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, whose final report was published in 2019 (Gouldhawke, 2020).

The *White Paper* and the politics of recognition were also ushered in alongside another shift in Canadian politics to a policy of multiculturalism and inclusion. This policy was used not only to quell Québécois separatism, but also to reform immigration policies that had previously restricted migration from non-European nations (Jedwab, 2020). While policies of multiculturalism did reform racist segregation and immigration practices, as Robyn Maynard (2017) argues, multiculturalism had a far more important function of ideologically obscuring the ongoing formation, maintenance, and history of racial hierarchies in Canada. Indeed, global Black liberationist movements that began to challenge white supremacy in Canada and abroad required a political and societal transformation of anti-Blackness/racial capitalism (Maynard, 2017).

As much is evident in the Canadian government's neocolonial interests, exploitative immigration policies, and impoverishment of Black communities (Maynard, 2017). Canadian foreign policy supported neoliberal economic interventions led by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in newly independent African and Caribbean nations facilitated colonial extraction of resources by introducing systems of debt, which not only impoverished these countries but also undermined their national political economies towards cash crops and away from subsistence farming (Maynard, 2017). These neocolonial systems ravaged African and Caribbean nation's economies, and forced many to seek new livelihoods abroad (Federici, 2012). Though the new immigration laws allowed for Black migrants to travel to Canada for economic relief, their position as migrants in the Canadian immigration point-system⁶ make them

⁶ A system of migration wherein potential immigrants must complete a form that assigns points to the applicant based on their language ability, education, work experience, and other factors. Successful applicants must exceed a

vulnerable to exploitative work programs such as the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) that is still in effect today, which pay low-wages, require long work hours, and have no benefits of citizenship (Walia, 2010). But, even when Black immigrants are granted citizenship, they are often funneled into low-paid and precarious work by government immigrant employment programs (despite often having many useful work skills) – which, when accompanied by neoliberal policies of austerity as well as the legacies of slavery and segregation, has led to the severe poverty, underemployment, and abandonment of Black communities in Canada (Maynard, 2017). Thus, Canadian multiculturalism masked a complex process by which the Black population of Canada grew while it was simultaneously subjugated to the lower echelons of the Canadian economic system.

As mentioned above, the segregationist era of Canadian history saw the association of Blackness with criminality in the white settler consciousness. This was to continue in this era as politicians and police would associate Black migrants with criminality, a move that was accompanied by police practices of racial profiling that led to the increased surveillance of Black communities, which have led to the disproportionate arrests of Black youth and migrants, despite research that shows crime to be evenly distributed across race and class (Maynard, 2017). Racial profiling has been shown to restrict Black folks' mobility across urban spaces, as they are often subject to carding or street checks by the police, an encounter that not only can lead to violence or arrest, but also psychological stress such as post-traumatic stress disorder and feelings of alienation (Maynard, 2017).

The notion of Black criminality has been entrenched even further by the Canadian War

certain point level to be granted the right of migration.

on Drugs, which was mobilized during the growing economic and social disparities faced by the Black community in the wake of neoliberal austerity policies during the 1980s. The War on Drugs in Canada cannot be tied to any evidence that drugs were threatening the safety of communities, as politicians claimed (Maynard, 2017). Indeed, the War on Drugs is best understood as the Canadian government's response to the growth of Black power movements nationally and globally that formed to protest the conditions brought about by liberal racial capital (Maynard, 2017). The War on Drugs in Canada expanded the powers given to the police for the surveillance, search, and arrest of Black folks belonging to the most impoverished and racialized neighbourhoods in Canada, which directly led to a massive influx of Black prisoners into Canadian jails at a rate five times higher than white folks in Canada (Maynard, 2017). The War on Drugs in Canada still is at work today, and though it is not publicized as such, it has largely been intensified since the 1980s, an intensification that has included the expansion of the prison population by 70% during Prime Minister Stephen Harper's (2006-2015) time in Parliament, with spending on federal corrections increasing by the same proportion (Maynard, 2017). While research has shown that the War on Drugs has been completely ineffective at combatting the drug trade, it has subjected Black communities "to spend important years of their lives behind bars, separated from family, saddled with criminal records" (Maynard, 2017, p. 102). Despite this, Canadian policymakers continue to make anti-Black investments in policing and incarceration rather than investing in public health, community services, and education for Black folks.

The Tradition of Abolition

Prison and police abolition, summarized neatly, is an activist movement that seeks to end policing and incarceration in all of its forms. That said, most folks involved in this movement

tend to avoid closed definitions such as the above, instead preferring to think of abolition as a way of thinking that leads one to the conclusion that police and prisons must be abolished, and moreover, that there are futures beyond simply abolition that are founded in collective creativity and struggle (Roberts, 2019). Contemporary abolitionism has its roots in the tradition of the abolition of slavery, especially in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (2013), who noted that the abolition of slavery was incomplete as a totally negative project, that it also required a positive project that fundamentally restructured social, economic, and political arrangements (McLeod, 2015). In this section, I discuss a number of ideas that emerge from this tradition that I believe to be of great use to understand (i) the imperative of abolition as a general social and political project, (ii) the necessity of an abolitionist analysis within community-led librarianship, and (iii) the need to analyse the public library itself within an abolitionist analysis. Only the first point will be addressed in this section by way of the discussion of these ideas, the two remaining will be taken up in the following section. The ideas that I have chosen to discuss are anti-reformism, community and security, and creative futurity.

Non-Reformist Reforms and Anti-Reformism

An important concept that stems from abolitionism is *non-reformist reforms*, a term that is attributed to Andre Gorz and was popularized by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Kaba & Duda, 2020). This term distinguishes the use of reforms as a tool in the abolitionist project, versus the use of reform as an end in itself. The project that uses reforms as an end in itself is aptly named reformism. Reformism is a project that assumes the current state of the PIC is, as Dylan Rodríguez (2019) describes, “a *discrete, mistaken excess* owing to criminological error, electoral opportunism, and moral failure ... [that] can be redressed and reformed within the existing systems of law, policy, and liberal justice” (p. 1593). But, as I have already discussed, policing

and incarceration are social tools that employ violence to allow for the expansion of capital, which in Canada takes the form of dispossession Indigenous peoples of their lands and sovereignty, and the subjugation of Black folks. Due to this, abolitionists see the problematics of policing and incarceration as something that cannot be dismantled by reforms; ultimately, the PIC must be abolished entirely by means outside of the reformist lens described above.

That said, abolitionists do not completely abandon reform as a tool, more specifically, they distinguish between reforms that expand versus contract the PIC. For those who may be skeptical that reforms, such as de-escalation training, can expand the PIC, it is important to note, as Angela Davis (2003) does, that the history of prisons has been a history of reform; not only was the prison itself a reform of the methods of state punishment, but moreover, prison reformist have existed since the inception of the prison, calling for more suitable living conditions conducive to rehabilitation, etc. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) comments, the results of “persistently reforming reformed reforms” (p. 14) have not been towards the goal of ensuring the safety and stability of communities, but rather are indicative of an incredibly unstable and violent system that needs to reform itself every now and then to maintain legitimacy and enable its further expansion (Rodríguez, 2020).

Due to this, the term *non-reformist reforms* refer to reforms of the PIC that mark steps towards abolition rather than the perpetuity of the PIC. There are no definitive or universal criteria for distinguishing between reformist and non-reformist reforms, though Miriam Kaba (2020) suggests that one should ask themselves when analysing a reform: does this reform expand the PIC? Does this reform make it more difficult to replace the PIC with something else? These are questions that have analogies in any situation where the end goal is abolition. So, while it would not be reformist to support a reform that decriminalizes drug use, it would be

reformist to support a reform that criminalizes hate, as this latter reform expands the scope of the PIC into new territory and legitimizes the PIC as the (only) solution to hatred.

Community and Security

Abolitionism also offers us new ways of thinking about notions that have become commonplace in our thought and imagination. While it is already clear that abolitionism requires us to critically rethink the function and necessity of policing and incarceration in contemporary society, it also prompts us to rethink the notions of community and security, of which policing and incarceration supposedly work in the name of.

In an interview, Robin D.G. Kelley (2018) discusses the life of legendary jazz pianist Thelonious Monk. While Kelley is certain to assert that Monk was a radical individualist who was driven to push the limits of jazz as well as his own creativity, Kelley also asserts that this is not at all due to Monk entering into the art form completely on his own, working from some sort of musical *tabula rasa*, as many other jazz musicians have suggested. Instead, Kelley states that Monk's musical formation happened very much within and through his community, from getting lessons at the local community centre, going to free concerts in the park, jamming in the back of a TV repair shop, and playing *for* his community: "it was a whole community that helped him develop his aesthetic" (Kelley et al., 2018). Importantly, Kelley and his interviewers then discuss the absence of this community that has the ability to intervene in one's life, an absence that has coincided with the withdrawal of the State, only to remerge in the singular form of repression and coercion through the PIC.

In considering the effects of incarceration and its incapacitating functions, Gilmore (2007) considers two nearly identical communities, different only in that one community experiences high rates of incarceration. As Gilmore (2007) states, not much is required to disrupt

the stability of a community, as the incapacitation of even three members can greatly disrupt the system of a community that employs those three to “make, move, or care for things”, so that when these folks are removed, there is “a consequent thinning of financial and emotional resources” which “hasten the demise of informal customary relationships that social calm depends upon” (p. 16).

For Kelley and Gilmore alike, community is something that everyone exists in relation to and with, something that we are dependent upon, and something that is dependent upon us. This notion of community confronts liberal-individualism and shows that no one is purely an individual, that a lack or disruption of community can spell disaster for its members. For Dylan Rodríguez (2019), abolitionism is itself about community; it is about creating a community of people that can hold one another accountable in their collective mission to transform themselves into the people that will abolish the PIC.

An important aspect of this community and longevity is its security, which must be disentangled from the liberal capitalist notion of security as freedom of private property (Neocleous, 2000). Safiya Buhkhari (2010) instead defines security as “freedom from danger, fear, and anxiety” (p. 37), which stems from trust: “[w]ithout trust there is no security. Trust comes through knowing and believing that you’re safe within a specific area, whether it’s a company of people or the confines of a building” (p. 39). Thus, the security of a people comes from that people’s community, and moreover, that community must actively work towards creating a collective trust. This stands in contrast to the common notions of security facilitated through the police, which is imposed from the outside. In fact, the police, in Buhkhari’s (2010) view, are a threat to the community’s security.

Domestic War and Creative Futurities

To expand on the last point above, given the threat that policing and incarceration represents for vulnerable communities through its embodiment of various violent logics of white supremacy, abolitionists such as Rodríguez (2020) have renamed liberal-reformist term *mass incarceration* with the more pointed term *domestic war*. The reason for such a renaming is clear following our discussion thus far: the term mass incarceration “subsum[es] incarcerated people under the notion of an undifferentiated ‘mass’”, but the term domestic war refers to the “acute and sustained – as well as paradigmatic and incomparable – *differentiations* of suffering, casualty, vulnerability, and carceral criminalization across gendered and racialized social profiles” (Rodríguez, 2020). For Rodríguez (2020), in line with the work of Du Bois (2013), this domestic war is in continuity with slavery and racial apartheid brought about by the logics of white supremacy; despite the formal abolition of both of the above, their overall project has continued without a counter-project successful counter project that restructures the foundations of society in the West.

Domestic war, according to Rodríguez (2019), is part of the greater project of *White Reconstruction*, which is best understood via Sylvia Wynter’s (2015) concept of *genres of human being*. For Wynter (2015), the human is not just *bios* but also *mythoi*, that is, we are not just human because we belong to the human species, but we are also human due to our conception of ourselves in the universe, our beliefs and values. Neoclassical economics, and its assertion of humanity as *homo oeconomicus* (i.e., a purely economically self-interested and rational being), for Wynter (2015), precludes the possibility of multiple *mythos*, thus only one possible genre of being. *White Reconstruction*, as defined by Rodríguez, is a project that arises in the post-racial apartheid West in order to stifle any insurgencies against the universalization of *homo oeconomicus* as the singular genre of being and is enacted by virtually all of its institutions. In

the context of domestic war, the futurity of other genres of being is not guaranteed, especially not without a praxis of (human) being that Rodríguez (2019) locates in abolitionism.

Indeed, abolitionism should be thought of as an intensely creative and positive project, one that seeks to introduce, as Angela Davis (2003) says, “a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society” (p. 105). Put another way by Fred Moten & Stephano Harney (2004)

Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society. (p. 114)

Thus, abolition is a creative force that challenges the cultural tendency to presume the permanency of its institutions of state violence and incarceration (Rodríguez, 2019). Abolition is fundamentally a theory of change that is far more about making new and better things, as opposed to just destroying the old (Gilmore, 2018). Abolition carves out a place in the future for a renewal of community and security, for the futurity of ways of being that are insurgent to the liberal mono-humanism the PIC is deployed to protect (Rodríguez, 2019; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015).

The Abolitionist Necessity for Community-Led Public Librarianship

As discussed above, abolition is a tradition that emphasizes the importance of an alternative understanding of things like community, security, and the future. It strives to be transformative, recognizing that the way things have been done cannot continue. When seeking a parallel to abolition within the realm of LIS, I am drawn to the rising practice of community-led librarianship as discussed by Pateman & Vincent (2016). The purpose of these forms of public librarianship is to address what is termed *social exclusion*, a problematic phenomenon where

marginalized groups of people are without access to social institutions, such as the library (Pateman & Vincent, 2016). Pateman & Pateman (2018) analyze this phenomena in the specific case of libraries by using Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, suggesting that socially excluded groups are often in the process of securing their needs near to the base of the hierarchy, such as food and shelter; however, traditional library models serve needs that are located nearer to the top of the hierarchy, thus dismissing the needs of much of the community. In Canada, this phenomena has been addressed at various times and places, most notably through the *Working Together Project*, in which the public libraries in Vancouver, Regina, Toronto, and Halifax used community development librarians to build relationships between libraries and socially excluded communities, towards the purpose of having these communities share their needs openly with the librarians, so that services originate in and are cooperatively served by the community (Williment, 2020).

Thus, the community-led strands of public librarianship are aligned with the project of abolition, in that they seek to decenter state power from above and reassert that power within a community. That said, I believe that the tradition of abolition offers a far more complete analysis of social exclusion than the class-based analysis of Pateman & Pateman (2018), that in turn necessitates an abolitionist form of community-led librarianship. In this section, I will argue for the necessity of an abolitionist analysis into the theory of community-led librarianship and will furthermore argue that this analysis requires a modification of praxis that abandons the use of policing in libraries, reframes prison library practices, and prompts us to envision a future of community-based libraries rather than community-led librarianship.

The Naivety of Community in Librarianship

How do we think about community in librarianship? In an article by Buschman & Warner

(2016), they argue that amongst the plethora of ill-defined terms in LIS stands the concept of community, a term whose content and use they find troubling. Of particular concern for Buschman & Warner (2016) is the ways in which traditional views of community tend to contain an “inherent exclusion creating an outside, or ‘others’; a smothering uniformity” (p. 14) – an inherency that they believe to be antithetical to librarianship. Indeed, Buschman & Warner (2016) go on to write that libraries must instead focus on a form of community that is mediated by institutions, a “political vision of community – one that puts conversation, inclusion, and democracy at its core rather than tradition, solidarity, and affective bonds” (p. 15). This institutional view of community is held in the Canadian professional library sphere, as it is embodied in the first principle of the *CFLA Code of Ethics* (2018), which states that “[t]he core mission of librarians and other information workers is to ensure access to information for all for personal development, education, cultural enrichment, leisure, economic activity and informed participation in and enhancement of democracy.”

The view of traditional forms of community as an imposition of an irrational uniformity of culture that can be rectified through participation in democratic institutions seems to ignore the legacy of white supremacy as it has been carried out through settler-colonial and anti-Black liberal-capitalist democracies, such as Canada and the USA. Indeed, although explicitly white supremacist communities form on the basis of excluding and eliminating BIPOC folks’ social life do exist in Canada, I do not think that Buschman & Warner adequately address the ways in which the imagined community that is the liberal capitalist nation state⁷ has also always engaged in logics of exclusion and assimilation. Moreover, they fail to account for the diversity that

⁷ See Anderson *Imagined Communities* (2016)

secure communities can enable and protect.

LIS scholars in many instances have discussed the need for stronger analyses of race within librarianship, especially of the ways in which “libraries have uncritically tethered themselves so Western ideological notions of universal knowledge that signify white modes of practice and thought as the legitimate and appropriate way” (Matthews, 2020, p. 6). The tradition of abolition requires librarians to confront the logics of white supremacy which underline the state’s operations, and to question the ways in which they operate within the function within the library. In particular, I find Dylan Rodríguez’s (2020) discussions of White Reconstruction relevant here, as White Reconstruction is understood as a transformation of domestic war from its overtly racist forms of violence, to forms of violence that are concealed through the normalcy of state violence and repression as it operates through state institutions. When one takes the premise of White Reconstruction seriously, then the concept of institutional community that Buschman & Warner argue for is better understood as a concealed form of violence, as the mission of libraries to universalize liberal democracy is precisely the objective of White Reconstruction and domestic warfare. Indeed, concomitant to the security of a white liberal futurity is the precarity and elimination of alternative futurities that can be founded in various liberatory struggles founded in Indigenous decolonization and Black liberation movements, among many others.

Community-led librarianship, as a service practice that centres on the communities who are targets of domestic war, cannot in good faith ignore the praxis of abolition. Indeed, the consequence of ignoring this praxis is the willful participation in the project of White Reconstruction and domestic war. As far as my reading of community-led librarianship is concerned, its theorists are in opposition to the traditional and institutional forms of librarianship

that are encapsulated by the project of White Reconstruction. That said, viewing community-led librarianship as a means of social justice in light of an abolitionist praxis requires us to reframe what sort of justice we are talking about: is it a justice that is defined by white liberalism, or is it justice as defined by the communities under attack by white liberalism? If it is of the latter sort of justice, as I would claim that it is in the case of community-led librarianship, then the adoption of an abolitionist praxis of community-led librarianship is necessary to disentangle the library from the PIC, and to begin working on the abolitionist project of securing the future and freedom of alternatives modes of being. This project must be enacted in all spheres of life, including the informational sphere where librarians claim their expertise.

No Policing in Libraries

The first lesson of abolition for community-led librarianship is the need to rethink library security in a way that radically dissociates itself from the logics of policing and incarceration. An obvious step in this direction is the complete abolition of police from the library, meaning that the police are not regularly present the library space, nor are they called upon to resolve conflicts. My use of the term “obvious” is not to minimize the potential difficulties of inscribing such an ethic into the library policy, especially given the politicization of police abolition. That said, I think that libraries with a social justice and community-led ethos may be able to approach these policy changes through the involvement of people from the BIPOC community who are already calling for the universal abolition of police. Perhaps the demands of these community members can be institutionally legitimized to library boards through librarians’ cooperation.

Even once this is accomplished, librarians must continue to work with these communities to construct alternative systems of security that do not fall into the traps of policing. This is true even of libraries who have abandoned the police as a means of security for their space and

collections. As I have described earlier, *policing does not begin nor end with the police*. Policing comes in many forms and through many institutions, and seeks to impose a particular social order and protect property relations (Dafnos, 2013). Thus, in the language of Sylvia Wynter (2015), the members of socially excluded communities are not only threatened by physical forms of violence to their body (*bios*), but also violence to their way of being (*mythos*). For instance, the threat that social workers pose to Indigenous communities in displacing youth from their home and culture (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019).

Keeping in mind the abolitionist principle of anti-reformism, I believe that we need to ensure our solutions to the police are not just the police in a new costume, a solution that inevitably requires its own abolition (Kaba & Duda, 2020). As Robinson (2019) summarized, all three of the predominant frameworks of library security strive to police their patrons in various forms, whether it be through heavy police presence, a culture of security instilled in the staff, or some combination of the two. Thus, the abolitionist must look outside these frameworks for a solution. While one is inclined to look at the Halifax Public Library (HPL) or the Thunder Bay Public Library (TBPL), who have both taken steps to integrate social workers into their security measures (Selman et al., 2019), as Stacy Collins (2021) states in an interview: “social workers should not be replacing police in a one-to-one relationship ... it shouldn’t be about how we can contain problem patrons or remove them from the space. It should be fully considered what their role is in the library.”

Indeed, solving the problem of security likely requires the reframing of security away from the security of private property that state institutions such as the police and social workers uphold, and towards the notion of security that Bukhari (2010) defines as belonging to a community where one experiences freedom from danger and feel safe amongst the people who

they are with. When considering working with Indigenous and Black community members in Canada, it is not clear to me how the inclusion of social workers into the library space facilitates this feeling of safety, especially as these professions have also done a great deal of harm to these communities (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Maynard, 2017).

While I cannot provide any definitive or practicable solution to the problem of library security, I do implore community librarians to work with their BIPOC communities to rewrite their library's security policies, while keeping in mind the abolitionist principles of anti-reformism and security. Making connections with those doing work in prison abolition could be especially useful in this endeavour, as their analyses and projects of security in their own communities can inform the library's own projects.

Prisoner-Led Librarianship

Adopting an abolitionist framework for prison librarianship seems particularly tricky. In Canadian federal prisons, librarian's activities are to "support and promote institutional programming," which purports to be correctional or rehabilitative for the incarcerated (Correctional Service of Canada, 2017). However, as Gilmore (2007) has written, the prison in the neoliberal era serves to incapacitate rather than rehabilitate, stripping the prison from a benevolent institution for all to one that maintains the safety of some. This picture is even more complicated when examined against the history of incarceration and criminality – for as we have seen, criminality has been deployed to support the logics of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness, allowing for the delegitimization and pacification of resistance to liberal capitalism (Maynard, 2017; Stark, 2016).

Finlay & Bates (2019) remark in their work that librarianship at large is antithetical to incarceration, and furthermore, it is antithetical to the desistance framework of prison

librarianship that they propose. While I do not completely disagree with these statements – the prison as an institution that strips the freedom of information from person cannot abide the ethos of librarianship nor desistance – the privileging of desistance within a framework of prison librarianship seems to make the implicit claim that all those who are incarcerated are in need of desistance, that is, that they are criminal to begin with. An abolitionist ethos requires us to understand that mass incarceration is not the product of an increasingly criminal society, but rather of a society that increasingly carceral (Gilmore, 2007; Maynard, 2017). By framing prison librarianship around desistance, this fact remains obscured, and the oppressive constructs of criminality are allowed to be reified within our profession and research.

As Austin & Villa-Nicholas (2019) write, much of prison library research views the incarcerated subject in an incredibly dehumanizing way. But as we have come to understand, the construction of the criminal is itself a category that functions within the logics of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness to purposefully dehumanize its subjects. For Bukhari (2010), the project of abolition demands that we:

exorcise those characteristics of ourselves and traits of the oppressor nation in order to carry out that most important revolution – the internal revolution. This is the revolution that creates a new being capable of taking us to freedom and liberation (p. 61).

The concept of the criminal as a subject of dehumanization is an obstacle that must be overcome in this internal revolution. Thus, the abolitionist framework of prison librarianship must not rely on the notion of criminality to ground itself.

As Malcolm X (1992) recounts in his autobiography, the freedom to explore the massive library collection at the Norfolk Prison Colony allowed him to learn more about himself and his position in history, and provided the basis for his analysis of racism in the USA. Prison

librarians, as located in a carceral institution that strips so many human freedoms from its subjects, are positioned to act in opposition to the carceral forces by carrying out informational social justice, as defined by (Mathiesen, 2015), which seeks to distribute access to information in a way that enhances folks' informational capabilities to a sufficient level. That said, the analysis of the factors of information access, the capabilities of importance, and the base level of sufficiency that Mathiesen (2015) outlines cannot be determined by the librarian in a paternalistic manner that reproduces the hierarchies of criminality. Instead, just as public libraries have adopted community-led services to address these questions, so too must prison librarianship empower the folks it serves by allowing them to define their library service in accordance with their own intentions (Mathiesen, 2015).

I suggest some conception of *prisoner-led librarianship* as a potential framework for abolitionist prison librarianship. Though it is outside the scope of the paper to flesh out such a framework, I imagine that such a framework would take many cues from community-led librarianship as according to Pateman & Vincent (2016); however, the problem that it addresses would not only be that of social exclusion, but also the more severe situation of serving people whose freedom has been taken away. A thorough analysis of the PIC from a synthesis of abolitionist and LIS perspectives would not only inform prison library practice, but also contribute to the more general abolitionist analysis of the PIC from an informational perspective.

A framework for prison librarianship such as this would also benefit from theories alternative to desistance, such as transformative justice, which seek to address harm through non-carceral means at the level of community to facilitate healing for the victim, offender, and their community (Morris, 2000). I also believe that, so long as libraries are a feature of the Canadian carceral system, historical research should be undertaken to understand *why* libraries, seemingly

opposed to the operations of a prison, are included in this system. Such an undertaking would not only clarify potential barriers to a *prisoner-led librarianship* that have been obscured ideologically by the carceral state and library professionalism but may even reveal to us more about the profession of librarianship in general, and its operations within the project of White Reconstruction.

By the Community, for the Community

According to Lankes (2011), “the mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities” (p. 64), where facilitation here is meant as “see[ing] the library as part of the community” (p. 66), rather than facilitation viewing the library as a tool that is distinct from its community. To test the type of facilitation that a library offers their community, Lankes (2011) asks “is the library ... an institution *of* the people or *for* the people?” (p. 66). I think that most of community-led librarianship would argue that the library is an institution *of* the people. Indeed, the relationship building service models of community-led librarianship seems to strive precisely for this – to have the hitherto socially excluded community members become an integrated part of the library. By doing so, the library is able to become an institution that can meet the needs of its community. At least, that is the way that it is understood.

A police reform that is much discussed and criticized in abolitionist circles is *community policing*, which is a model of police service that strives to have officers become integrated into communities, building relationships with people in the neighbourhood, listening to and finding solutions to concerns about the condition of the community (Vitale, 2017). While reforms of this sort have been introduced to ostensibly combat carceral regimes, in practice they have tended to escalate police surveillance of neighbourhoods and aggressively enforce so-called *quality of life*

laws (MPD150, 2021). As an example of a reformist reform, community policing does not directly challenge the institution of policing, but rather allows it to change form.

Could a similar criticism be laid upon community-led librarianship? It is clear to see that there is an analogy between the service models of community policing and community-led librarianship, especially with how they position themselves in respect to their traditional service models. I think that if we are to look at the community-led library service model closely, we will find that this is more representative of a reform of traditional librarianship, rather than the abolition of this old form. Indeed, it is unclear how public librarians working from within institutions that are a part of the project of White Reconstruction are moving themselves beyond the horizon of white supremacy without taking the dramatic steps necessary to restructure librarianship entirely, possibly from the ground up. Though this proposition might appear as dramatic to the generally reformist field of librarianship, this sort of creative destruction may be necessary to eliminate white supremacy in the library, as de Jesus (2014) suggests. My point in this suggestion is not to say that the mission of the library as described by Lankes is a bad one. Rather, I suggest it because the deeply embedded structures of our institutions are likely what prevent us from doing a good job of meeting the objectives of our mission. This form of practice is at the heart of abolition, and it is a worthwhile practice, as it allows us to creatively and radically reimagine the world and the possible shapes that it can take (Davis, 2003).

The project of abolition requires a restrengthening of community (Rodríguez, 2019). In the realm of librarianship, I am energized by the work of folks who create what have been called *fugitive libraries* by Shannon Mattern (2019), informal and grassroots libraries, typically organized by Black women, to meet the needs of their communities that are not currently being met by their local libraries. Examples include OlaRonke Akinmowo's *Free Black Women's*

Library in New York City, which operates out of a suitcase full of books that Akinmowo mobilizes across her city's urban space, unapologetically taking up public space and transforming that space into a library that responds to the needs of the people it serves (Mattern, 2019). Another example that I have come across recently are the community spaces that have been organized through the Noname Book Club, named after Chicago rapper Noname, who is also one of the organizers. The club highlights two books each month that are written by racialized authors, facilitating discussion online and in-person around these books, and also sends these books to incarcerated folks across the USA. The organization is very much tied to the project of abolition and is currently in the process of creating a community library in Los Angeles.

The creation of fugitive libraries is, in my opinion, indicative of the failures of institutionalized public libraries to uphold their mission of facilitating knowledge creation within their communities. The current model of community-led librarianship is flawed in that it asks folks from outside the community to do library work within the community. In line with the Buschman & Warner quote above, the library attempts to create a community from within the institution, in a way that is harmonious with liberal democracy. But, as the insights of abolition show, institutions such as these do not strengthen communities that have already formed around ways of being that are alternative to liberalism, rather, they attempt to bring these communities within the auspices of white liberal futurity, crushing ways of being that are insurgent to this futurity along the way (Rodríguez, 2020).

Perhaps the abolitionist path forward for community-led librarianship is to analyze the means required to make grassroots community libraries the norm of librarianship, especially for the facilitation of knowledge creation in socially excluded communities. If this were the case,

then many of the resources and labour that are expended on relationship building would be largely unnecessary, as the needs of a community would be far more apparent to a librarian that is already a member of that community. The libraries would be organized from their foundation with the specific and organic community that they serve in mind. Collections would be built around the informational needs of the community in a much different manner than the (white) liberal pluralistic collections of public libraries, and library spaces would be far more conducive to creating a safe space for discussion that is imperative to knowledge creation. There are likely many barriers to the normalization of these forms of libraries, such as funding, policy, and urban geography, to name a few. These might even seem insurmountable challenges to be accomplished within the confines of library professionalism. That said, community-led librarians are placed in a fantastic position to work on projects with abolitionist and community building groups, supporting them as they construct alternative informational structures within their communities. I think that this is an option that should be explored by those in the profession.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to tackle the massive topics of librarianships connections to the PIC, the origins of policing and incarceration, the history of policing and incarceration in Canada as it relates to settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness, some principles rooted in the tradition of abolition, and the necessity of an abolitionist praxis for librarianship. As stated in the introduction, this paper is not a complete account of all these topics, as there is far more work required to both theorize and practice abolition in librarianship. Instead, this paper is better thought of as an invitation to librarians to consider how it is that we have arrived at the present, and what we need to do to get out of it. The tradition of abolition offers us a very promising path into the future.

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