Abolition is a Verb

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At the end of August, 2020, we came into an odd spring. In Sydney, Australia, we had emerged from lockdown to a tentative city where bustling shopping malls, newly opened bars, and crowded stadiums contrasted with heavily policed and quickly shutdown protests on the streets. Mass protests against state violence and anti-Black racism proliferated across the world, including, in Australia, where First Nations-organised protests fostered an internationalist solidarity while focusing on the foundational anti-Blakness particular to this settler colony. We heard, in our own city as well as in major daily newspapers and across social media platforms, calls to abolish prisons and police. We watched with interest as the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Y Davis, Joy James, Mariame Kaba, and Debbie Kilroy was cited by activists, lawmakers, and students. We wondered what would emerge from this moment in which the vision of abolition those activists offer suddenly faced the threat of being weakened by reform, compromise, and an imagination constrained by what appears to many as intractable realities. If abolition, as we learn from Gilmore, means that *everything must change*, then nothing less is what we must demand. We wanted to think about the demand that abolition makes and the risks of asking for less in a moment in which a global pandemic and a mass movement against the prison industrial complex have converged.

So we (Astrid and Andrew) asked Debbie Kilroy and Tabitha Lean, two formerly incarcerated women whose activism is front and centre in the abolition movement here in Australia, if they were willing to speak to us. We interviewed each of them and found their responses so resonant that we have brought them together in this interview-essay. Kilroy spoke to us from her busy office in Meanjin where she runs Sisters Inside, an activist organisation that advocates for the abolition of prisons and the rights of incarcerated women and girls. She spoke about her time in prison, about the need to learn to resolve conflict and confront violence outside the carceral system, about the violence of criminalisation and the rotten logic that values property over life, and about the inability for reform to change a system that must be dismantled.

Lean spoke to us after the prisons in Adelaide had gone into a second, sudden lockdown, exacerbating the stress put on incarcerated people and their families. Lean is a Gunditjmara woman born and raised on Kaurna country. Following a period of incarceration in South Australia, she has been a committed abolitionist and advocate for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. She lives with her three children in Adelaide and is, among other things, a poet, artist, and scholar. Lean articulates the need for and practice of abolition with clarity and concision; she offers abolition as something to be shared, cherished, and aspired towards.

Returning to these interviews some months later, we are again confronted by the state's attempt to widen the carceral net and mobilise law and order rhetoric for political gain. On 9 February 2021, the Premier of Queensland Annastacia Palaszczuk announced a set of 'tough new bail laws' designed to target repeat youth offenders. The new laws include the expansion of court powers to allow the fitting of GPS tracking devices as a condition of bail for 'high-risk' offenders aged 16 and 17, reversing the presumption of bail, giving the court power to seek assurances from parents and carers that bail conditions will be met, and the expansion of policing powers. A Twitter thread from Palszczuk announced that the new measures would 'target hardcore youth criminals who repeatedly offend and put the community at risk', language that the legal researcher Alison Whittaker has likened to the infamous 'superpredator' designation coined by the conservative American political scientist John J. DiIulio Jr. in the mid-1990s and reproduced by politicians from both major US parties (most notably by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) as a key trope of 'tough on crime' platforms that demonised non-white youth.

Just two days after the Queensland government's new laws were announced another death in police custody occurred in Victoria. The alarming regularity of such events and the fact that deaths inside disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Islander people highlights both the violence of the prison system and its inextricable relation to racism. These recent developments emphasise the ongoing challenges that abolitionists face. If 2020 saw the popular take up of abolitionist discourse, then these changes announce a forceful desire on the part of state governments to entrench the status quo. Confronted with continual attempts to expand the carceral state, abolition

remains an ongoing and urgent project.

'[W]hat does it actually mean that people are talking about defund the cops, defund police, abolish prisons? Because they say that, and then what I see is [that] the solutions are still reformist or moderate and not abolitionist and so we've still got a lot of work to do', Kilroy said. We asked both Kilroy and Lean what they felt about the increasingly mainstream discussion of abolition. Kilroy's response highlighted the disconnect between calls for abolition and practices of reform. Lean had a similar response, highlighting the danger of foreclosing the possibility of abolition before the work has been done: 'I'm really glad it's becoming a mainstream concept, but what you see when things become a mainstream concept is this watering down of it. […] We're making concessions and compromises before we've even tested the real argument.'

Both women brought up the recent 'Raise the Age' campaign which called for a change to the law that allows for children to be arrested and imprisoned from ten years old to 'at least' 14. 'Our line should be: abolish prisons not raise the age', Kilroy said. For Kilroy, decarceration can only be a step toward abolition rather than an end goal: 'abolition is the destiny, decarceration is the journey.' She knows that movement-building requires bold and uncompromising visions – as Dean Spade (2020) puts it, 'we get more when we demand more and build bolder, bigger pressure' (37). And so rather than raising the age, Kilroy said: 'we call for the release of everybody in prisons now and we will not moderate or stand beside any organisations that are gonna be moderators or reformists, no matter who they are.' For Lean, the campaign's message can easily be inverted: '[It's] saying we don't think kids should be held criminally responsible until they're 14 so we're essentially saying a 14-year-old should be in jail, a 14-year-old should be strip searched by an adult, a 14-year-old should be spit hooded because that would be OK. That's not abolitionist thinking. So it's interesting to watch these abolitionists – or, proclaimed abolitionists – argue for Raise the Age, which, inverted, is essentially arguing for the criminalisation and caging of children at the age of 14.'

If abolition is not prison reform, then what is it? For both, it is a lifelong practice. Lean spoke of the two parts to abolitionist work – dismantling and rebuilding:

> Abolition is a political vision – a political vision of liberation, obviously with the goal of eliminating prisons, policing and surveillance, but it's also an opportunity. It's an opportunity to imagine a future free of punishment, imprisonment and exile. […] It's about dismantling policies, practices and institutions that make people disposable. You know, I kind of want to challenge that ubiquitous belief that there are throwaway people. But then on the other hand, we want to bring together communities to develop revolutionary and transformative community-based responses to violence and safety issues, rather than relying on systems that reinforce and perpetuate violence. And from my perspective, the strength of abolition is that it's anti-capitalist, it's anti-racist, it's feminist, it's internationalist, it's intersectional, it's pro-co-operation. And it's also, I think, a very necessary component of decolonial work, or decolonising work. I think abolition is rooted in collective care and values of mutual aid and there's huge strength in that.

Kilroy shares this commitment: 'Abolition for me is a lifelong journey to challenge the status quo of the prison-industrial complex and the use of carceral mechanisms in many forms.'

Kilroy described how the mentality of policing becomes embedded in everyday life. 'We're being socialised to be police and prison officers from a very young age', she told us. 'When you're at school they tell you to dob on each other. They have cops inside schools. We have neighbourhood watch. […] As a response, you tell the principal, you tell the teacher, you tell the policeman, you tell the screw.' This internalisation of disciplinary logics – or what Gilmore (2020) calls 'deputisation' – works to produce an image of the law as synonymous with justice. But as Kilroy reminds us: 'There will never be justice in a legal system, in a white legal system. And people only seem to understand that once they've been done over in it.' Central to the project of abolition, then, is building different ways of conceptualising justice and conflict resolution. For Kilroy, the process of deputisation means that 'we don't learn how to do conflict resolution between ourselves, to build a resolution or what could be a resolution, or what could be the principles of how we operate as a community and when a principle is breached. How do we come together and have a conversation about that?' Her commitment to transformative justice is not merely theoretical. She described a pivotal moment inside:

> When I was in prison my friend got murdered sitting beside me. So, you know, cops are called, lawyers are called, I was stabbed twice trying to stop it. Storm, who killed my friend – her name was Debbie too – pleaded guilty, she gets sentenced to life imprisonment. Anyway, long story short, she's been sentenced and Sisters Inside starts. […] I had to do the hard work and resolve the conflict, the murder, between us. And so I asked one of the women to ask Storm to come up to the chapel – we used to have visits in the chapel, our management committee meetings in the chapel. […] She came up quite tentatively though because those who have been in prison know that they're violent institutions, and there was gonna be a whole heap of payback but, I mean, she came, and over a period of months, in the safety of our group, we had those conversations about Debbie's murder and what she'd done and not only the impact on me but the other women who'd been in prison and were still in prison, because we'd all had to live with that. The screws could leave. They could take stress leave. But we were just dumped inside that prison, left to resolve it for ourselves. And you know, we went through a long process, the group of us, and Storm as well, she was with us and engaged, and we went through a healing process together about what had actually happened. And then Storm came on Sisters Inside management committee (was on the committee for years) and I advocated for her to get parole. She's out on parole, we're close friends.
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> That's taking an extreme, that's a murder, but it's a process that you can take if you're comfortable enough to come to the table and honest enough. Honest in the sense that, yes you're going to be angry, yes you're going to be grief-stricken, yes you're going to be upset, but to be able to sit in the honesty and move through it and come out the other side. But I know that in this racial-capitalist world, because we rely on cops and prisons and those structures, people hold onto that anger all the time and never want to release it. […] We still don't teach children how to resolve conflict. So we grow up as adults relying on the prison-industrial complex and all its tentacles.

The experience of imprisonment consolidated Lean's conviction that 'the key to health, safety, stability, and liberation has never and will never be found in punishment and imprisonment'. Her activism is thus 'about challenging that belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe – but doing [it] in a way that invites people to imagine this different kind of world, rather than telling

them what it should be or what it can't be'. Lean grew up with her 'staunch unionist' father, spending time after school 'sitting on dirt mounds of working sites while he was picketing, literally putting his body and his income on the line for workers'. As a teenager, she also became active in the labour movement. 'I've always had this kind of pull to social justice and recognition that the rights that we have have never been handed to us by the suits in Canberra. But then the day I walked outside of those prison gates I became an abolitionist […] I walked out and I literally turned around and said I'm gonna pull this place apart brick by brick.'

For Lean, the abolitionist movement must centre people with lived experience of incarceration, and must always find new ways to challenge the reinvention of law and order:

> I want to make abolition a commonsense goal. […] I see it as being an iterative movement, in the sense that we have to constantly reiterate our ideas, our demands. And there's a couple of reasons for that. One is that it holds space for people to continually go along this journey – I don't write off reformists – I think they're one idea and one understanding away from becoming abolitionists. And if we continually reiterate our demands or our ideas or these concepts, it leaves room for people to join us in that movement. But the other thing that constantly reiterating your demands does for you as an activist is sharpen those demands and sharpen that dialogue.

This iterative process is necessary to deal with the 'tentacles' of the prison-industrial complex that reach everywhere into everyday life. On the one hand, methods of surveillance and punishment operate across schools, hospitals, and communities; on the other hand, the effects of criminalisation and incarceration last well beyond a period of imprisonment. Criminality, in other words, is determined both pre-emptively (for example, in schools) and perpetually (in the exclusion of formerly incarcerated people from social and economic infrastructures). The extensive reach of these tentacles are at the heart of Lean's framing of disposability as the core of carcerality:

> People say do the crime, do the time, but the time never ends. […] There are all these secondary layers of punishment and invisible punishment that no one cares about and no one wants to hear about. I'm eighteen months out of prison

> but I'm still viewed by society and by the system as an offender. I struggle with this idea of being permanently relegated to the sub-class of human existence. I'm always gonna be an ex-prisoner, an ex-con, an ex-offender. As if the offense was the point of radical departure in my life.

Lean spoke of the 'collateral consequences' of imprisonment, the ways that punishment extends beyond the 'terms of the sentence imposed by the judge' and into life on the 'outside'. She describes the social stigma attached to imprisonment and how the widespread manifestation of this rejects the idea that formerly incarcerated people might require social, economic, and infrastructural support post-release: 'The other week someone said to me – because I was talking about housing issues for people coming out of prison – and they were like: "Well why should they get free housing?" And I was just like, I don't even know what you're talking about. You don't want people to be housed and secure and stable? You want them to be having to steal or rob or break into places to sleep?' She continued, describing the legal and civil consequences that formerly incarcerated people face:

> We are locked out of so many markets due to a criminal record. You're locked out of the housing market, you're locked out of the economic market, you're locked out of job markets… And it's like, where do you go from here? When I was in prison I obviously lost my house – before that I had my own home, I lost it and all the money went on legal fees. So I'm in prison, I have three kids, and I tried to get on the public housing waiting list. I was put on category three, which is, you don't get housed – you know, you might wait thirty years to get housed. I'm not going to see a public house in my lifetime. […] I came out with $100 to my name, three kids, and no house, no capacity to get a job because I can't get a criminal history check and I can't get a working with children check.

Lean described to us the ever-changing nature of bureaucracies, the impossibility of keeping up with labyrinthine systems, and the lack of attention given to how such systems impact formerly incarcerated people. Part of the issue, she noted, is the privatisation of risk management and the outsourcing of criminal history and working with children checks from the state to private companies, which is key to the ever-expanding infrastructures of incarceration: 'There's become an entire industry constructed around this, a lot of this stuff is privately managed and companies are making money.'

Lean's account of post-release life is an account of infrastructural inequalities. It reveals not only the uneven and unequal distribution of access to the resources necessary for living but also the massive investment required to maintain and expand the carceral system. She reflects on the infrastructure of parole: 'you know, it's the hardware, it's the monitoring centre, it's the correction officers coming round to your home, it's the correction officers in community settings, it's G4S [the British multinational security services company that provide a range of services to the Australian legal system] that run the monitoring centre – there's a whole heap of intersections between private and public infrastructure there that are feeding and upholding each other. People making money off people's oppression.'

It is not only in relation to post-release life that the question of access to infrastructure intersects with the carceral system. Infrastructural inequality is a key factor in how and why people come into contact with the law in the first place. As Kilroy told us, 'prisons have become the default response for homelessness, mental illness, drugs and alcohol, poverty'. Against the policing of various social and economic crises, abolitionists argue that we can (and must) intervene in the reproduction of ongoing infrastructural inequalities in order that the needs of the most vulnerable people in our communities are met *before* they come into contact with police. This, of course, is revolutionary, implying a reconceptualisation of resources, property, and ownership unbound by capitalism. More immediately, such thinking asks us to reimagine how funds are allocated. Kilroy points to the Queensland government's 2018–19 investment in policing and prisons of over three billion dollars, noting that such massive investment at the expense of things like public housing will only ever amplify recidivism. 'The reality is', she told us, 'you're recriminalised because you're homeless'. She asked us to imagine if funding to police and prisons was redirected: 'those social issues, like housing, would be addressed.'

This demand for more state spending is echoed by Gilmore (2020), who tells us that 'no abolitionist who is a true abolitionist wants to save money. What we want is for the money to be spent, to enhance, and support human life so that it can flourish in a way that doesn't destroy the planet'. The question of divestment from policing and prisons must go hand-in-hand with a demand to spend money in ways that redistribute resources rather than enshrine and protect property rights. Kilroy brings it back to a simple and direct articulation

of value:

> Property can be replaced, human beings can't. When are we going to value each other more than a fucking thing? You know what I mean? […] I just refuse to value things over any human being. And I don't care what that human being has done. Because I also believe that we are so much more than the worst thing we have ever done in our lives, and to allow people to have the opportunity to be better than the worst thing that they've done in their lives is fundamental in breaking down the racial-capitalist state.

Because, as Kilroy puts it, 'the enemy is the prison, not each other'. This insight is what allowed her to seek reconciliation with Storm, and it's what drove her resolve to survive the violence of the prison system and to help others to do so too. Working together to survive and resist the violence of incarceration and its devastating impact on families, kinship networks, and communities is at the heart of Kilroy's notion of *sisterhood*, a concept that has carried into her work with Sisters Inside. The organisation runs programs inside prisons that seek to support women and girls, such as Sexual Assault Programs, Anti-Violence Programs, and a Supreme Court Bail Support Program. Sisters Inside also run initiatives that intervene in the infrastructural inequalities that often lead to (re)incarceration, such as the Health Support Program and the Decarceration Program, as well as supporting women and girls in the transition from inside to outside. The #FreeHer campaign crowd-sources funds to pay warrants for unpaid fines that Aboriginal mothers have been subjected to. To date, #FreeHer has helped at least 396 women remain out of prison and the groundswell of support for the campaign has been central in the passing of legislation in Western Australia to stop Aboriginal women being imprisoned for non-payment of fines.

'Sisterhood is important. I cannot be where I am today without my sisters. I stand on the shoulders of amazing women just as they stood on the shoulders of amazing women before them. And now us older ones, we talk about how the younger ones can stand on our shoulders', Kilroy told us. The work of abolition is internationalist and intergenerational – learning from those who came before, listening to those who are inheriting a changing world, teaching and learning as a collaborative practice. It is also, as they both emphasise, anti-racist work. And to be anti-racist in Australia means understanding white

supremacy and racialisation as functions of the settler-state and as part of the colonial project: 'It's a continued invasion', explained Lean:

> It's continued colonisation, it's violent, it's brutal, and as we know it's deadly for Aboriginal people in the system. It presents a whole other colonial frontier, and multiple ones – whether that's child protection, the courts, police, prison, hospitals and health services and schools. […] The overlapping interests of state and industry employ policing, surveillance, imprisonment and punishment as a means of controlling populations and continuing the colonial project.

The work of abolition, in other words, is total: it understands history, resists the present, and plans for the future. It is daily work that requires the enormous and endless labour of organising, discussing, and imagining. But this daily labour is life-giving as well as tiring – after all, as Lean reminds us, 'Abolition is a verb':

> So we're doers. We're doing two-pronged work: tearing down and dismantling systems while building up systems. I like this idea of tearing down systems that fuck the life out of us but building up systems that breathe the life back into us. And I think it's a journey. I don't think abolition is a destination that we'll arrive at; I think it's constantly being made.

Works Cited

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