Introduction

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A Year of Collective Struggle

The long year of 2020 was characterized by profound suffering, loss, disease, and death. It was also animated by collective struggle and mobilization, including the tremendous movement against police in the United States, Canada, and worldwide. Calls to defund and abolish the police rose in chorus in the weeks following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020. That killing was not an anomaly. Canadians, however, were quick to cast it as an American tragedy, distancing "racial tension" in policing from the Canadian experience. In tragic validation of those who pushed back against the narrative of Canadian exceptionalism—the mantra of "not here, not us"—a series of police killings followed across the country.

On April 8, sixteen-year-old Eishia Hudson was killed during a pursuit by Winnipeg police while driving a stolen jeep. She was a young Ojibwe teen. On May 27, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, an Afro-Indigenous woman, fell to her death from a high-rise balcony as she struggled to escape from officers on a "wellness check." Fatally shot by the local police force on June 4, Chantel Moore died in another wellness check, this one in Edmundston, New Brunswick. She was a member of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation. Days later in the same province, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) shot and

killed Rodney Levi, a Mi'kmaq man and member of the Metepenagiag First Nation, during another wellness check. The list keeps going—in June, Ejaz Ahmed Choudry, sixty-two, was killed in Malton, Ontario, by Peel Regional Police, who were called to the scene for yet another fatal wellness check. None of the officers in any of these cases were held criminally responsible or faced any professional reprimand.

In response to these atrocities, waves of protest roiled the continent. But while the spring and summer of 2020 witnessed the rise of a broad, active abolitionist movement, calls for defunding and dismantling the police should not be seen as new. Rather, they must be recognized as grounded in the experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples—as well as (and living in intersecting identities with) people of colour, migrants, disabled, poor, mad, and queer people. They must also be founded in a basic struggle for survival in the face of ongoing police and state violence. This volume brings together activists and academics from the country currently known as Canada[1] who have insights to offer on policing, violence, safety, and community. The authors advance arguments for abolition and share experiences that are living proof of their analyses. It is our hope that these works will contribute to the movement, and that we can centre these perspectives in our collective understanding of the role of police in society. For every person in the country currently known as Canada who may feel that the police keep them safe, there are more who experience police as a key driver of distress and harm in their communities.

Certainly, the police—and the larger carceral system in which they are embedded, including courts, prisons, social workers, the non-profit industrial complex, and educational institutions—continue to be normalized. They are made to seem natural, inevitable, and necessary: What would happen without them? Every year, Canadian governments spend millions of dollars (in 2020–21, the federal government alone was projected to spend $3.33 billion on the RCMP[2]) to sustain and expand their police forces—unconscionable expenditures justified as "necessary" to public safety, while disinvesting in social safety nets and essential services. As the authors here emphasize, the

police do not keep everyone safe; they serve the interests of the state, multinational corporations, and white property owners at the expense of Indigenous lands and the lives of Indigenous, Black, working-class, mad, immigrant, poor, and disabled people and communities of colour. A series of well-entrenched myths work to obscure this truth and reinforce the legitimacy of the police: Canadian laws are just, the police uphold the rule of law and treat everyone equally, and without the police, communities would descend into chaos and disorder. These myths are cover for a specific control mechanism, rooted in the exploitative labour market, colonial territorial ambitions, white possessiveness, and a deep structural racism that takes time and effort to unpack for those without first-hand experience of where and when the police act.

While "police reform" is sometimes proffered as a solution—more cultural awareness, anti-racist training, body-worn cameras (BWCs) for officers—the authors in this volume critique the very idea of the system as "failed," "broken," or in need of reform. They point, instead, to how the system is working *as designed* to criminalize, control, and contain those communities whose very existence threatens the settler colonial status quo. Reforms have not worked; in fact, they serve only to entrench the very system that causes harm in the first place. We cannot reform our way out of the violence of a system that is inherently so. The more we police our neighbourhoods and communities, the more fragmented they will be. That is what police achieve: a breakdown of neighbourhoods through violence, intimidation, surveillance, and criminalization.

We must, instead, imagine otherwise. This collection suggests that it is possible to imagine and enact safety differently; it is possible to respond to distress and harm with care. It is possible to respond with concern and assistance, situated within a framework of relational accountability. To do so, police power must be eroded and dissolved. Contributors offer specific ideas for how this can be done. Their words are rooted in experience and solidarity with those putting their bodies and their lives on the line to fight for a better world.

Not New, Not a Fad

Grounded in the lived realities of their communities and neighbourhoods, Black feminist organizers and scholars in the United States have long called for the defunding and abolition of police. Intellectual expressions, visions, and practices of abolition are theorized in the works of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Beth E. Richie, Dereka Purnell, Mariame Kaba, Andrea Ritchie, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Angela Y. Davis, and many others. Their work and local organizing, which have become a model for other communities, are in large part the reason that calls for police abolition and defunding became intelligible so quickly and so widely during the summer of 2020.

Across the continent, Indigenous activists and academics, such as Patricia Monture-Angus and Luana Ross, have similarly drawn attention for decades to police mythologies and the violence of the penal system. The Idle No More and Indigenous resurgence movements point to police as a form of violence and containment that exists to maintain the prevailing economic and political order. Tasha Hubbard's feature films, *Two Worlds Colliding* (2004) and *nîpawistamâsowin: We Will Stand Up* (2019), have highlighted, respectively, the police violence of "Starlight Tours" in Saskatchewan—the abandonment of Indigenous people on the outskirts of town on freezing winter nights—and the trial and police treatment of the family of Colten Boushie following his killing by a white farmer in the same province. Indigenous peoples have resisted policing in Canada since its inception in the nineteenth century, when the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP, now the RCMP) was established as a paramilitary organization to clear the plains for white settlement. The police have been a lynchpin in colonization and continue to maintain this violence through their constant surveillance of urban neighbourhoods and the artillery they bring to resource conflicts across the country.

Black intellectuals have also pushed back against the myth of Canadian benevolence in the founding of the nation. Robyn Maynard's crucial book, *Policing Black Lives* (2017), brings to light the

role of police in maintaining the legacy of Black enslavement, as well as ensuring the cheap labouring class of Black people continues to underpin the nation's white wealth. Desmond Cole's book, *The Skin We're In* (2020), provides a harrowing and detailed account of a year of police violence in southern Ontario and the deep racism that underpinned it. The edited collection *Until We Are Free* (2020) provides a national picture of Black Lives Matter in Canada and how Black liberation movements are confronting issues like police and prison abolition, often through solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

In this present volume, the authors echo, amplify, and add to those important contributions and voices that came before us and from whom we have learned so much. From the outside, though, in the wake of the weekly demonstrations against police violence following George Floyd's murder, it may have seemed like the movement popped up out of nowhere. In a viral tweet, one Twitter poster commented, "I personally think it's really cool how we all went from learning how to make banana bread to learning how to abolish the police in a matter of weeks."[3] On the one hand, this tongue-in-cheek post points to how quickly and convincingly people could switch gears from isolation baking to insurrection. But more deeply, it gets at how seamless the transition to collective learning and action can be when the moment is ripe. COVID-19 was like a powerful flashlight casting about and revealing every pre-existing injustice in our society: prisoners were denied personal protective equipment (PPE) and spent months in lockdown; encampments sprang up across the country to keep unhoused people safe from shelter outbreaks and inadequate space to physically distance; women—Black women and women of colour, in particular—experienced massive unemployment; and racialized communities bore the infectious brunt of the virus as working classes forced by labour out of their homes, in every neighbourhood, in every city in North America. Police violence and killing was the last straw. It was the moment in the pandemic when people found a collective voice to fight back.

In this context, the police became the focus of a trenchant

structural critique against a white supremacist, class-based, settler colonial, heteropatriarchal society. Data in support of police abolition flew around the internet, across social media, along with social scientific and community accounts of the decades of failure at police reform. The more people took to the streets, the more violent the police suppression became; state governors in, for example, Minnesota and Washington, DC, called in the National Guard to quell mobilizations. The more people defended the police, the more clearly they exposed the ideologies of "safety" underpinning their massive budgets and criminal impunity.

North of the medicine line, in this country, people had just "Shut Down Canada" in national solidarity blockades to protest the February 2020 RCMP invasions of Wet'suwet'en territory, protecting the Coastal GasLink pipeline and state investments in the deal. Then Desmond Cole's *The Skin We're In* surged onto the bestseller list for a second run. The book, which chronicles the incredible activism of Black Lives Matter–Toronto and other organizers, added intellectual and historical acuity to the movement for police abolition. Momentum grew throughout the spring and summer of 2020, and a proliferation of grassroots efforts ensued—toolkits, public education resources, mutual aid projects—designed to raise collective consciousness and support the communities and individuals most affected by the penal system. It was as part of this groundswell of community action that the impetus for this collection was born.

"We Keep Us Safe": Community as Abolitionist Praxis

As Black community organizer Mariame Kaba reminds us, "When something can't be fixed, then the question is: What can we build instead?"[4] Abolition is a horizon, a desire for the future, but it is also a series of actions in the present. What are some of the tangible ways people keep each other safe—from the police and from interpersonal harm? While critics decry the "naivety" of the movement and its supposed disconnection from reality, the authors in this collection show

how they have put abolition into action, drawing on their experiences and knowledge as activists, harm reduction workers, community development advocates, and academics. Some have intimate knowledge of the violence of the penal system and decades of experience attending to its effects and enacting alternatives; some have spent years studying policing, the myth that police keep people safe, and the actuality that police perpetrate violence, creating cycles of harm that, in fact, make neighbourhoods and communities less safe over time. All of the authors have visions for what we can build instead. These are ideas and lessons that we think all people in the country currently known as Canada—and beyond—can learn from as well.

Building community, connection, and care are the centrepiece of this work. Abolitionists experience community in organizing and we experience togetherness in mobilizing. At its best, the movement is a model for how to enact solidarity and mutual aid: "The police don't keep us safe, we keep us safe," say organizers. Abolitionist understandings of relational accountability are lessons deeply informed by Black feminist and Indigenous communities, who have long been organizing in this regard. The model of mutual aid at the centre of the movement is not just a means of mobilizing; it is a way of providing protection and support for one another. It is a model of a more just world in miniature.

In contrast with the punitive logics of the police, which thrive on criminalization, removal, and isolation, abolitionists value community care and relationality. The movement continues to connect neighbourhoods, communities, and social groups in ways that police violence and state neglect will never do. Some say abolition is a fad, but the movement is deep-seated; it is not going anywhere. The call to disarm, defund, and dismantle the police is here to stay;[5] the authors in this volume explain why. The collective struggle of 2020 has brought new energy to an enduring vision. That energy is good: it propels us to continue to imagine otherwise and to create a more just world together.

Chapter Summaries

We hope you will find the chapters in this volume inspiring. Some of the authors write from an academic standpoint and make theoretical arguments. Others write from experience in organizing, harm reduction, and community and social development work. We hope that the mix is a good one, and that the ideas and experiences reach you in a good place.

Chapter one by Jeffrey Monaghan explores police, conservatism, and white supremacy, describing overlapping social networks between police and far-right groups and their convergence in "thin blue line" symbols and thinking. Tracing the development of this network in Canada back to the North-West Mounted Police, Monaghan breaks down the policing myth that public police are apolitical or non-biased, showing the opposite to be true.

In chapter two, Ruth Nortey elaborates on the history of activism against anti-Blackness in Toronto. Nortey looks at the rise of the Black Action Defence Committee and at waves of contention and organizing, culminating in the contributions of Black Lives Matter–Toronto to a national movement for Black lives in Canada.

In chapter three, Julius Haag examines quantitative material on trends with police use of force, focusing on police violence and profiling against Black Canadians. Haag provides an empirical basis for claims about police violence and the need to defund police in Canada.

In chapter four, Ted Rutland and the Montreal Defund the Police Coalition trace out the group's emergence and its engagement with communities targeted by police in Montreal and Quebec. They explore the police's anti-Indigenous and anti-Black tendencies and bring forth specific demands—to defund, disarm, and demilitarize the police, reinvest in communities, and decriminalize sex work, drug use, and migration.

In chapter five, Kevin Walby makes four arguments for police abolition: that academics should learn from and participate in social movements; that police budgets are unreasonable municipal

expenditures; that the growth of public policing is disproportionate in the age of austerity; and that public policing foreseeably creates more harm in society than it will ever remedy.

In chapter six, Ryan Hayes writes about the need for labour unions to break ties with police organizations. Hayes argues that police have never been favourable to labour and have often been antagonistic to unions, while also noting the politically conservative and regressive aspects of police associations in Canada.

In chapter seven, Jessica Evans, Alannah Fricker, and Rajean Hoilett reflect on organizing for prison abolition during a pandemic and explore the links between calls for prison abolition and for police abolition. Both movements argue against criminalization and promote harm reduction and the need for real safety instead.

In chapter eight, Shiri Pasternak argues that public police were created to protect the exchange and flow of capital in society and to control and contain Indigenous peoples in the land we now call Canada. Pasternak critiques the use of injunctions to remove Indigenous peoples from their lands through criminalization, arguing that the lines between private capital and public police are not dividers, but merely divisions of labour toward a common goal of dispossession.

In chapter nine, the Free Lands Free Peoples collective draws attention to the need to abolish not just prisons and jails, but also the broader carceral apparatus that supports those institutions. The authors examine police as agents of a settler colonial state. Criminal justice institutions are colonial in their origins and operations; resistance, struggle, and mobilization is justice.

In chapter ten, Vicki Chartrand draws lessons from Indigenous communities that have been organizing to address the issue of murdered, missing, and disappeared Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit+ people. She describes searches and community patrols, marches, memorials, and vigils to do the work that the state refuses to do and that criminal justice agencies cannot. Chartrand explores the weaving of communities together through walking, storytelling,

and sharing, forms of community development and creation of social bonds.

In chapter eleven, Tami Starlight, Moka Dawkins, and Anonymous share experiences with Linda Mussell and the P4W Memorial Collective on Prisoners' Justice Day 2020. They describe first-hand the abuse and negligence faced in the carceral justice system, which includes police, prisons, probation, parole, and the court system. This testimony shines a powerful light on a system that provides no hope and no healing.

In chapter twelve, Ellie Ade Kur and Jenny Duffy, on behalf of Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project, reflect on the carceral violence of police who monitor and criminalize sex workers. They describe the community mobilization and search for Alloura Wells, a young Black and Indigenous trans woman, to show how the policing of sex work is an example of the failure of police to keep people safe and alive. Sex workers, the authors suggest, should be at the centre of organizing for defunding and abolition, yet are too often excluded even from progressive movement spaces.

In chapter thirteen, the Sex Workers of Winnipeg Action Coalition analyzes the experiences sex workers face when confronted by policing and the criminal justice system. The authors describe an example of community action for defunding the police, arguing for the importance of cross-movement solidarity in grassroots organizing.

In chapter fourteen, Elene Lam and Chanelle Gallant reflect on the work of defending migrant sex workers from policing. They explore an amalgam of agencies that monitor, surveil, and criminalize these migrants. Public police work in tandem with provincial and federal agencies—and with community organizations caught up in an "anti-trafficking" framework that conflates sex work and trafficking. The authors call for defunding and abolition to be applied broadly, to agencies that include notably the Canadian Border Service Agency and intelligence agencies.

In chapter fifteen, nicole marie burton and Hugh Goldring use a comic to depict how police respond to drug use and even harm

reduction practices. Burton and Goldring show how police approach these issues and events through a crime-fighting lens that fails to keep people safe and ends up causing more harm, suffering, and fear.

In chapter sixteen, Ann De Shalit, Adrian Guta, Camisha Sibblis, Emily van der Meulen, and Jijian Voronka compare police and social work as oppressive institutions. Social work, like policing, relies on racialized categories and settler notions. The authors challenge the idea that simply removing money from policing and putting it into social work will improve racial justice. Instead, social work needs to be transformed as policing is abolished, as part of a broader movement toward economic, social, and racial justice.

In chapter seventeen, Edward Hon-Sing Wong, MJ Rwigema, Nicole Penak, and Craig Fortier similarly make arguments for abolishing carceral social work. They argue that social work is colonial in its origins in Canada, and that it has long been used to suppress and monitor Indigenous communities. Social work education needs to adopt a decolonizing and abolitionist framework to transform that institution.

In chapter eighteen, Kikélola Roach provides a view and a voice from the summer of 2020, capturing the energy and enumerating the claims made at the countless rallies against police across Canada.

Finally, in chapter nineteen, Robyn Maynard gives a short account of the history of police and state repression of Black people in Canada, as well as Black resistance. Maynard makes an important argument for defunding and abolition of police in Canada, calling for the dismantling of colonial, racist, and violent institutions.