

Abolitionist Imagination

Re-Mapping Canada's East Coast Prisons

Helen Yao

Graduate Women and Gender Studies Program

Mount Saint Vincent University

Unceded Mi'kma'ki Territories

Helen would also like to acknowledge that the construction of prisons and expansion of policing is the modern-day continuation of colonial dispossession and that with this acknowledgement there must be a concrete commitment to dismantling colonial institutions

In this series of artworks, I obtain pictures of prisons from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and use a variety of artistic methods to re-imagine them. The project is a practice of abolitionist imagination and a disruption of the carceral landscape. I ask myself, as I sit with these pictures and wrestle with the crushing weight of testimonies from inside these institutions: What can I do to cleave open the veneer of law and order and expose the cruelty beneath? How can I (artistically) dismantle these mechanisms of carnage and forge them into something different? What life-sustaining structures can we build instead of prisons? Creating an abolitionist future requires nurturing intimacy as a form of rebellion against state violence. Radical care, rooted in Indigenous knowledge and Black feminisms, is a crucial part of abolitionist feminist praxis (Simpson, 2017; Whynacht, 2021; Kaba, 2021; Maynard & Simpson, 2022; Haymarket Books, 2022; Jones, 2022). I am inspired by Robyn Maynard's (2022) letter to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in *Rehearsals for Living*, where she imagines walking through Toronto and mapping "some of the places where our collective apocalypses are being drawn up" (p.11). She says:

...It is hard to believe that this— THIS— is what is to show for the accumulated catastrophes of our past-presents, our ancestors' lives and bodies and dreams of otherwise being funnelled — accumulated — toward these undifferentiated grey masses of rock, brick, steel and glass filled with undifferentiated living (just barely) pink-grey masses of human-shaped greed... That should

we make it through this, our great-grandkids will have to look at pictures of this unremarkable landscape, these boring and unimaginative tributes to stolen wealth and stolen lives, to make sense of the who, why, and where of it all. (p.16)

When I read this paragraph, I wanted to scream from how deeply I felt it. I also wanted to map out these sites around me and rip them apart. When you have read and heard and watched and mourned and cried over all of these tales of catastrophe, how can you not burn with rage when you come face to face with the architects of the apocalypse? In the context of my project, prisons are more explicit sites of violence. I still want to partake in this re-mapping exercise, because I think it is worth contesting the belief that prisons are natural, inevitable features of our society. This is an attempt to look *closely* at sites of carceral violence, especially when so often we have been told to look away from what happens behind their walls. It is an attempt to bring to light what has been branded unfathomable, unspeakable, and undesirable, while insisting upon its capacity for transformation.

The Cracks in the Walls

¹Springhill Institution



I know a man who stabbed a man inside and got sent off to the SHU
But he says when somebody comes after you then what else do you do?

-El Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 2022, p.136

¹ Source: <https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/>

Description: A typical cell in the segregation unit at Springhill Institution. The black and white image depicts a cot with an open book, a toilet with a washbasin, a window, pale walls, and a spotty floor with a thin mat.

² Source: See 1a

Description: Image 1a after it has been altered artistically by the author. A hole has been drawn on the prison walls. Outside the cell, there is a glimpse of a yellow sandy beach, blue and green waves, and a stretch of purple sky. Silhouettes of sea birds can be seen amongst the waves. Inside the cell, there are pen drawings of seashells on the cell windowsill. Green vegetation with white highlights is drawn on the cell floor and the cot. In the corner of the image, where the toilet is, beige and green paper cut-outs in the shape of tulips and butterflies are glued onto the page. A speech bubble with yellow highlighted outlines hovers over the pages of the open book, depicting an excerpt from *Abolitionist Intimacies* (Jones, 2022): "I know a man who stabbed a man inside and got sent off to the SHU/But he says when somebody comes after you, then what else do you do? (p. 136)"

It starts with a picture of a segregation unit inside Springhill Institution. This photo, like many others in this project, is taken from a photo essay by the Senate Committee on Human Rights (2018). The cell is small and empty, with a toilet, a bed, and an open book on the sheets. El Jones (2022) writes that prisoners told her they have to clean up the overflowing toilets with their bare hands. Someone said that they were once in a segregation cell barricaded with iron plates, it was where Ashley Smith's brother was when he heard about her death.

Segregation units are well known for inflicting trauma and exacerbating mental health issues (Senate of Canada, 2018). In 2007, guards watched as nineteen-year-old Ashley Smith choked herself to death in her segregation cell (Kilty, 2014). I do not think people who have never been confined understand the brutality of carceral isolation. My own frame of reference came from when I was held for a week in a hospital psychiatric unit at eighteen. I was struggling with suicidal ideation and an undiagnosed trauma disorder. I was considered codependent, emotionally dysregulated, and a risk to myself and others. Phone calls, visits, my own clothing, translation services for my family, were some of the things that were withheld from me during my stint in the psych ward. Even as I write this, years later, my hands shake and fear constricts my lungs. When I encountered the notion of prison abolition, I realized that I did not need to deny the gnawing feeling in the back of my mind whenever I thought of paper-thin sheets and brain-numbing boredom; I did not have to keep repeating the words I had been made to believe, which is that isolation would keep me safe (where my mental condition cannot infect those around me) and a stripped-bare room is where I would find healing (where I can bypass the years-long waitlist and access the resources that I had been deprived of, at the cost of my autonomy).

I know that there is no clean equivalence between psych wards and prison cells, but I cannot deny the chilly recognition that rises in me when I read about people taking their own lives in segregation units. When your body and your mind are under the total control and mercy of others, you

start understanding powerlessness and worthlessness in a raw and real way. When abolitionists say that segregation is not path to healing, I feel that statement in my bones.

I pick up my marker and smash the pale walls apart. The cell gives way to an ocean. I think of how many times someone would lie in the little cot, dreaming of sea birds and crashing waves. How many of us travelled to Canada by the sea? How many of us think of being buried in it and letting the currents take us home? The plants that crawl into the cell and the tulips that grow out of the toilet bring whispers of freedom. Butterflies wander in, carrying thoughts of a warmer place.

Jones' (2022) poem "There will Never be Justice" is about seeing prisons for what they are. Prisons contain people from communities hyper-surveilled and under-funded; they serve as a remedy for systemic neglect, a place for the men who stabbed another man because they thought they had to fight for their lives. Angela Davis (2003) notes that the prison "relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism" (p. 6). Robin Kelley (KODX Seattle, 2017), Mariame Kaba, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (The Graduate Center, 2020) indicate that the organized abandonment of neoliberal austerity is accompanied by the organized violence of carceral interventions.

Abolitionists recognize that while we are all capable of committing harm, our social positions determine whether we are regarded as deserving of rehabilitation (Davis, 2003). Critiquing the racist, classist, and sanist constructions of criminality does not mean abolitionists naively assume all incarcerated people are non-violent and virtuous. In Ardath Whynacht's (2021) account of domestic homicide, she recounts sitting with men who have killed their families. Her experiences working with the victims and perpetrators of intimate violence has led her towards, not away from, abolitionism. She confronts the reality that some incarcerated people *have* committed egregious harm, and argues that *in*

spite of this, police and prisons are not the answer. Abolition is more than feel-good stories of healing and exoneration. It is sitting with the complexity and *humanity* of those that are criminalized, and *still* rejecting incarceration as the solution. Jones (2022) says, "I don't think you have to not have done it for justice to be miscarried" (p.138). Abolitionists oppose prisons not on the basis of everyone inside being innocent, but rather because we believe that prisons do not address harm.

Springhill Institution



Love is a contraband in Hell, cause love is an acid that eats away bars. But you, me, and tomorrow hold hands and make vows that struggle will multiply. The hacksaw has two blades. The shotgun has two barrels. We are pregnant with freedom. We are a conspiracy.

-Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 1999, p.130

³ Source: <https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/>

Description: A black and white photo of a pay phone and a bench behind rusty iron bars. This is a cell where prisoners are held as they make phone calls at Springhill Institution.

⁴ Source: See 2a

Description: Image 2a after it has been altered artistically by the author. Pen drawings of vines resembling grape or ivy twine around the phone and stretch across the cell walls. In a similar manner, cracks are drawn on the bench with little mushrooms and grass emerging from the gaps. In the left corner, pink and green paper cut-outs are arranged in the shape of peonies and glued onto the page. The cell bars that take up the forefront of the image are shown to be broken, as if being corroded by acid. In the space between the decaying bars, a pink and blue speech bubble demonstrates a quote from *Assata: An Autobiography* (Shakur, 1999): "Love is a contraband in Hell, cause love is an acid that eats away bars" (p. 130).

I imagine sitting in the cramped, rusty cell and picking up the phone, knowing that companies like Bell are gouging every cent from my precious minutes with my loved ones (Jones, 2022). This is one of the only ways prisoners make contact with the outside world, the Senate document tells me (Senate of Canada, 2018). I think about how intimacy is regulated and policed in carceral settings, how El Jones (2022) says she held the hand of someone who was crying and the guard gave him a warning. When Springhill goes on lockdown, there are no calls or visits. Families travelled all the way to the prison only to be turned away because a lockdown happened (Jones, 2022).

In Angela P. Harris's (2011) article on gender violence in a prison nation, she notes that the only language of intimacy men are granted behind bars is violence, and that is the dialect so many of them pass onto their kin. Whynacht (2021) reminds us that domestic homicide is a disfigured language of love, told through possession and coercion – the very same refrains infused into these prison walls. In this sense, the cruelty of carceral institutions mirrors the tactics of an abuser. The violence prisons claim to address only becomes systematically applied, its effects lingering in our communities.

I wonder how easy it would be to pry open the locks and bend the bars. I think about the little line of hope that makes its way out from the phone, like a stubborn vine breaking through the frost. I think of how prisons crush intimacy like a summer storm tearing into the delicate petals of peonies. But in spite of it all, abolitionist intimacies still bloom. Assata Shakur (1999) says: "Love is a contraband in Hell, cause love is an acid that eats away bars" (p.130). Desmond Cole comments to Jones (2022) that the work they do is about struggling every day, religiously, to build a heaven from hell. Mariame Kaba (2021) tells us that hope is not an emotion, it is a discipline. Hope as a discipline is about "believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change" (p.60).

It takes a religious commitment to choose hope, choose vulnerability, choose trust, and choose intimacy in spite of all the violence and alienation. Abolitionists bear witness to all the terrible things

Abolitionist Imagination

human beings are capable of, yet we insist that transformation is possible, both individually and socially. Davis (2003) and Kaba (2021) remind us that much like the movement to abolish slavery, prison abolition is a struggle beyond our lifetimes. I think it must be like planting seeds not knowing when they will sprout, but you still gently place each one in its pocket of soil like a prayer. We build intimacy with those on the inside, even when they have committed harm, because we refuse to accept the logic of disposability. We practise an insurgent love that demands accountability and justice from our relations (Whynacht, 2021). We learn the language of love as resistance. And isn't that the essence of any anti-oppressive struggle? I draw dandelions that emerge from cracks in that bench. If they grind their heel into one, a thousand more will grow. May we love abundantly, may we have so much love they can never stamp out the coming of spring.

The Fire

Burnside Jail/ Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility



But if you go get the ropes
I'll bring the bulldozer
Because what we learned from our history Is how quick their idols shatter
And they taught us how to wipe away
And end the day in laughter
Like your grandmother's grandmother whispered
Soon, dear, it will be over

-El Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 2022, p.x

⁵ Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/covid-19-outbreak-announced-at-burnside-jail-cases-rise-at-women-s-prison-1.6301532>

Description: The black and white image depicts a clean, empty hallway inside Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility (also known as Burnside Jail). On the right side of the hallway is a banister that presumably overlooks the lower floors, on the left side there is a row of unoccupied cells with heavy doors. Through the open doors, it seems that each cell is equipped with a toilet and a washbasin.

⁶ Source: See 3a

Description: In the altered image, red and yellow flames curl out of the cells. Black marker lines on the cell doors make them appear broken and shattered. The hallway is painted black, with a chasm of red and yellow in the middle, as if the floor has been split open and fire is burning underneath. The background of the image has also been painted black, with splatters of white dots resembling embers and constellations.

The original photo was taken in Burnside. I found it in a CBC news article titled "COVID-19 outbreak announced at Burnside jail, cases rise at women's prison" (Ryan, 2021). Citing Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Maynard (2022) reminds us of how vulnerabilities compound in "forgotten places". Inmates do not have control over their interactions. COVID exposures become an inevitable part of their sentences (Ryan, 2021). I think of how many elders are at risk for complications, how frequently lockdowns occur, and how long people have gone without seeing their loved ones. #FreeThemAll4PublicHealth was a demand that emerged from New York City jails during the COVID-19 pandemic (Free Them All for Public Health, n.d.). Organizers drew attention to the negative health outcomes for incarcerated people and their loved ones. They argue that this will become exacerbated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The high infectious rates in prisons pose a significant public health risk. The campaign fought for vulnerable populations to be released from jails and provided with adequate housing and healthcare. #FreeThemAll4PublicHealth was part of a broader call for NYC to stop the expansion of prisons and police forces. The pandemic radically transformed our lives, giving many a peek into what confinement and isolation can feel like. It also laid bare all the ways certain groups are simultaneously deemed expendable in the face of illness and essential for the machinery of racial capitalism (Simpson & Maynard, 2022). It gifted us a chance to question "business as usual" and demand something better.

Before I paint a future without prisons, I want to acknowledge the transformation process. I do not want my creations to read as calls for "feminist" or "humane" prisons. I do not want to build luxury housing or corporate offices on top of these sites, replacing one form of exploitation with another. Jones (2022) describes the difference between "life that is reclaimed from death" and "the life that feeds itself by ignoring death" (p.192). We build something beautiful in defiance of the suffering inflicted upon our communities, not because we desperately want to bury these sites of destruction and move on.

Locks are torn from the doors, the ground splits open like a wound. Free them all, so that we can set fire to this place and grow something from the wreckage. The doors are open. The windows are broken. The ceiling has fallen. The crisp night air bursts in, and the stars have never looked so bright. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) teaches us that in Nishnaabeg thought, constellations are doorways into other worlds. They bear witness to the past, present, and future. They map fugitive flights out of settler colonialism. Simpson and Maynard (2022) poignantly assert that not all world-endings are undesirable. For so many, the apocalypse has already occurred. We demand the end of *this* world, in affirmation of all the other worlds that have been destroyed by colonialism and racial capitalism.

Kaba (2021) calls abolition a “jailbreak of imagination” (p. 52), where we “imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society” (Davis, 2003, p. 46). Gilmore (2019, as cited by Davis et al., 2022) proclaims: “Abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions” (p. 61). So, if you pour the gasoline, I will strike the match. We can watch the embers rise and become twinkling stars. This destruction is an act of love, a dream of freedom, and a promise of rebirth.

The Things We Reach For

Burnside Jail/ Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility



⁷ Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/central-nova-scotia-correctional-facility-heating-problem-1.4980227>
<https://www.halifaxaminer.ca/government/province-house/the-prisoners-at-the-burnside-jail-are-engaged-in-a-non-violent-protest-here-is-their-statement/>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/former-burnside-inmate-jail-conditions-1.4801281>

Description: A black and white photo of an empty cell at Burnside Jail/Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility. The room contains a toilet with a washbasin, simple shelves mounted on the wall, a desk that is attached to the wall, a stool nailed to the floor, a long and narrow window, and platforms by the window where the prisoners presumably sleep.

⁸ Source: see 4a

Description: An altered version of image 4a which depicts a reimagined space. Instead of a narrow slit, marker lines indicate that the window now takes up the whole wall. Painted shapes reveal an outside scene of pink and yellow sky with white clouds, and a flock of birds. On the windowsill, a monstera, a pothos, and an olive tree sit in yellow pots. The shelf on the wall is filled with books. A tea kettle and two cups are placed on the table. Two pairs of shoes lay casually on the floor. A fireplace with bright flames takes the place of the toilet. The room is bathed in warm, golden light.

Here is another photo from Burnside, which appears in a number of news articles. One of them tells me that during the winter, Burnside Jail is so cold that you cannot sleep (Mulligan, 2019). Another one details the lack of adequate reproductive care, phone access, and clean air (Cowley, 2018). On Prison Justice Day, the inmates at Burnside went on strike demanding better medical care, library access, unlimited visits, healthier foods, etc. (Jones, 2018). They cited Nelson Mandela, George Jackson, the Black August strikes in America, etc., emphasizing their strike's relationship to prisoner struggles around the world. The strike went on for twenty days, through worsening conditions and continuous lockdowns (Bousquet, 2018). A prisoner died shortly afterwards. This event generated national attention, with protestors coming right next to the jail to show their solidarity, so close that those inside could hear them.

I put books and plants and a fireplace in this room. I want to instill warmth into it so that no one would ever be too cold during the winter. I try to portray intimacy that has been stifled by incarceration: Two pairs of shoes casually laid out on the floor, a pot of tea to share, a big window for the sun, a family of birds in the sky... I feel a bit like an interior designer, trying to make a home out of what had been a cell. How do I get the proportions right? Where does the nailed-down stool go? Is this a fire hazard? Oh well, this is an exercise in imagination. Just remember, the fire that warms the hearth comes from the flames that tore down the prison. This is not a cell that looks like a home, this is a cell that has been destroyed so that it can become a home.

Jones (2022) talks about doing writing workshops with women in prisons. She says that guards reprimanded her for "illegal counselling" because she expressed sympathy when one of the women told her that she broke up with her girlfriend. Things as simple as a hug, a touch on the hand, a greeting, or a promise for later contact were all policy violations. She was eventually not permitted to return to Nova.

This is the same prison where Camille Strickland-Murphy took her own life, where Veronica Park died from negligence, where Ashley Smith was held in administrative segregation, and where a guard was found guilty of raping women in custody (Hounsell, 2015; Luck, 2016; Durling, 2021; Sponagle, 2022).

I think about that bone-deep chill you get when you have gone too long without human contact, and you start to wonder whether or not you are real. My heart is shattering all over again from how prisons reduce you to a sum of body parts, carve off the things that make you feel human, and make them into a luxury you cannot afford. I think about what it means when the only touch you receive is when you are pricked by the needle, scraped raw by the shackles, violated during the strip search, or shoved against the cold concrete. How long does it take before hurt becomes the only way you know how to speak to yourself and to make yourself real?



Ackerman, Pahlke, & MacInnes, 2019, *Conviction*, 20:23-20:46

⁹ Source: Screenscaps taken by author from *Conviction* [Video] <https://gem.cbc.ca/media/conviction/s01e01>

Description: A series of four black and white captures from the documentary *Conviction* (Ackerman, MacInnes, & Pahlke, 2019). In the upper left picture, a woman with a ponytail and dressed in prison clothing can be seen crouching on her hands and knees, her right arm stretched out. The subtitles read: “[A] couple times I tried to touch but you can’t quite touch it”. The upper right picture shows her hand and forearm, with floral patterned tattoos, pushed beneath a small gap under a door. It is only wide enough to fit her fingers. In the lower left picture, her hand is holding a small film camera to the gap, attempting to capture a footage of the grass outside. There are line tattoos of flowers and stars on her forearm. The subtitles say: “I can see it, I can see it. Now I can see the grass”. The lower right picture shows the prison courtyard, with high concrete walls, an overhead net, and surveillance cameras. There is snow on the ground. In the corner of the yard, in front of a heavy metal door, is the small figure of the woman on her hands and knees looking through the crack. The subtitles read: “It’s so close but so far away”.

The documentary *Conviction* (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019) is produced in collaboration with women in Burnside and Nova. I often think about this scene, where Laura, one of the inmates, says that she would crouch by the door and peek at the grass outside. There is a tiny, tiny gap. A slice of nature thinner than an exhale. The blades of grass are visible, but she cannot quite reach it. The scene makes me recall how when I was hospitalized, I would sit by the window all day, watching the grey skies and the snowy mountains. They told me I was not allowed to sit on the windowsill, because I was a risk to myself and I could get hurt by falling down. I think about how I escaped the sterile room with its reinforced windows, because I did not have to run with generations worth of wounds from colonial dispossession. Laura talks about her father being a survivor of the Residential Schools, how being surrounded by violence means you start to internalize it (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019). It becomes how you navigate conflicts and make sense of the world.

Indigenous abolitionists such as Vicki Chartrand (2019) observe that the cruel aspiration of colonial dispossession is exemplified in institutions of segregation and assimilation. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) tells us: "The 'social ills' in our communities Canadians so love to talk about are simply manifestations of the hurt and trauma from the ongoing violence of dispossession" (p.42). Jones (2022) writes: "I have a hard time seeing justice as a reserve without a well/But then we bring its children a smudge kit in their cell" (p.137). Grounded knowledge and cultural practices are destroyed, as Indigenous bodies are literally and figuratively severed from the land. Grass, intimacy, land, justice are locked behind iron gates- things to reach for, but not quite allowed to touch.

Decay, Rebirth

Nova Institution for Women



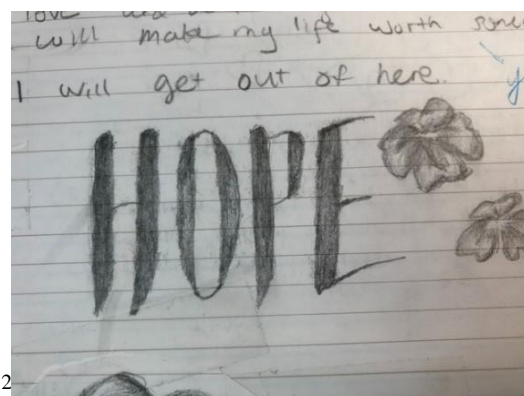
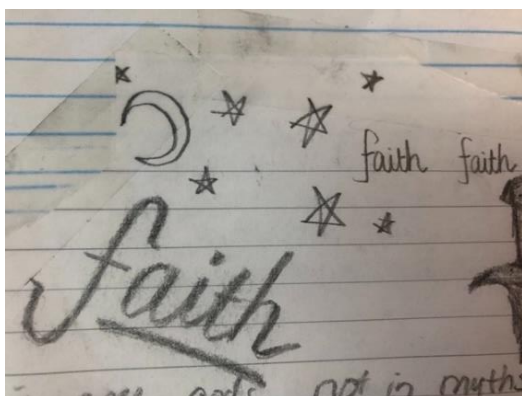
¹⁰ Source: <https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/>

Description: A black and white photo of a cell at Nova Institution for Women. Through a door that is ajar, the viewer can see into a room with a bare mattress, a toilet, and cinderblock walls. On the wall, the resident of the room has painted the words “faith”, “hope”, and “love”.

¹¹ Source: See 6a

Description: 6a after it has been artistically altered by the author. On the doorframe, a tiny ladybug is crawling up green and white shapes that resemble moss and fungi. Inside the cell, the toilet is covered in similar mossy cracks, with lupins sprouting out of the bowl. The bedframe is transformed with black and white marker into a raised garden bed with strawberry plants in it. The cinderblock wall is broken, and through the holes, there are peeks of trees, grass, and a blue and purple sky. What remains of the wall is covered with vibrant graffiti. The words “faith”, “hope”, “love” are now in colour and surrounded by various phrases and patterns: “hope is a discipline”, “abolition democracy”, a rainbow, green leaves, a yellow bird... A large drawing of two hands reaching for each other covers the wall below, wrapped in pink, orange, and green. Underneath, the words “free them all” and “ACAB” are visible, along with blue and pink patterns of lavender plants.

Someone had written a message on her wall: "Faith, hope, love." I think about how I sat in my hospital room and wrote "hope" again and again in my journal, reciting these silly little words and clichés I never thought twice about before being hospitalised. In that moment, even the most mundane things held so much weight. Everything was a ritual and a prayer. You reached for every ounce of your conviction to tell yourself that you will make it out of there. You hold onto silly little words like they are the most precious thing in the world, because in that moment, they were the only tethers you had. In my mind's eye, I can see the woman standing on her bed, painting the words onto the cinderblocks. Was she alone, or were there people with her? Who offered her the paint and the brush? Did she paint it after a particularly bad day, or did she paint it on a good day to remind herself that things are capable of being better? What does she think about when she looks at it?



Excerpts from my journal, 2018

¹² "Faith"

Source: Author

Description: A snippet of a notebook page, where the word "faith" is written with pencil in bold, cursive letters and underlined. The word is repeated several times in a smaller font. There are also pencil doodles of a crescent moon and some stars.

¹³ "Hope"

Source: Author

Description: Another snippet of a notebook page, with the word "hope" written in large and bold letters. Beside it, there are pencil doodles of flowers. In the line above, the sentences "I will get out of here" and "I will make my life worth something" are visible.

Laura does one last smudge with her friend before she gets released (Ackerman, Pahlke, & MacInnes, 2019). When she is outside, she yanks up a handful of withered grass and crumples them between her fingers. She laughs, the sound does not echo in the open space, there are no prison walls to ricochet off of. Her smile is radiant in the sun. There is a chorus of knocks from the prison windows, overlapping thuds scattering like summer rain on the pavement. The women inside always knock when one of them gets released. It is like a ritual, or a blessing. A few hours later, Laura overdoses. She still struggles with opiate use, and she eventually ends up back in prison (Ackerman, Pahlke, & MacInnes, 2019). This happens again and again in *Conviction*. Women walk to their freedom full of hope and determination, but what awaits them on the outside is precarity, lack of shelter, toxic relationships, inaccessible addiction treatments, etc. Hope and determination were not enough to keep them out of prison.

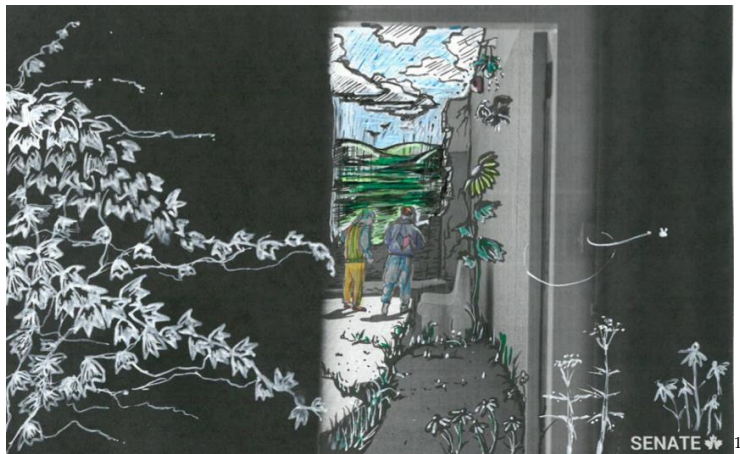
When you first taste freedom again, you swear up and down you will never take it for granted. You promise yourself that you will do everything to make your life count. I tried very hard to make myself believe that being free of a hospital room meant being free from mental illness. Despite this, I still sat in an emergency room two years later because I could not find help anywhere else. The doctor prescribed me sleeping pills and sent me off, jokingly saying: "Don't take all of it at once." When I was outside, I crouched down in the snow and screamed. It was not enough. Vowing to be better was not enough.

I think about the aching distance between the prison and the garden. Laura can finally reach for the grass she yearns for, yet she still ends up stuck inside a cell. Jones' (2022) friend Randy finally gets released after his wrongful incarceration. He spends his time out in the sun, mowing his lawn, but the monitoring anklet he wears still chafes. I think about all the people I know and love who make their way

in and out of crisis situations and psychiatric institutions. A garden cannot thrive if the soil remains depleted. Leaving prison is "still not freedom" (Jones 2022, p.187), because the world we live in is not yet free of precarity, organised abandonment, and carceral institutions.

I keep the words "faith, hope, love" on the wall, because I know these words live on a continuum. Simpson (2017) says: " We first have to survive in order to escape. And we first have to escape (enough) before we can mobilize" (p.118). I keep the words because they tell a story of how we survived. They remind us of how prisons left people fighting for their right to hugs, warmth, and their own clothes; how they built fences with barbed wires, but it could not keep out the voices of solidarity from outside. We kept reaching, even when steel-toed boots threatened to crush our fingers. We nurtured abolitionist intimacies to survive and revolt, and we will use it to thrive. The new vision shows that prison walls have crumbled from a thousand little knocks. A thousand prayers for freedom carried in the "tap tap tap" of knuckles on cinderblocks. The words "faith, hope, love" are no longer the only thing on the wall, they are accompanied by a cacophony of colours and slogans. Fungi and moss dig into the cracks. Lupins sprout from the toilet. Strawberries take root in the decomposing bed frame. When you look at the picture, I want you to think of children's laughter, the first day of spring, and the gentle sounds of people cooking in the kitchen. I want you to imagine how we can thrive.

East Coast Forensic Hospital



The path to abolition goes through every aspect of life. There is no body and no form of life that is outside the imperative for abolition today.

-Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Must be Red" [Youtube], 9:24

¹⁴ Source: <https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/>

Description : A black and white photo of two residents in plain grey clothing walking in a courtyard at the East Coast Forensic Hospital. Over their head, the sunlight is filtered through a wire net that prevents contraband from being thrown in. The grey walls surrounding them are tall and marked with security cameras. A stone bench is set into the ground beside them.

¹⁵ Source: See 8a

Description: 8a after author's alterations. White pen marks ivy crawling upon the shaded wall. A small bee hovers over silhouettes of wildflowers. A crack runs through the floor of the courtyard, green grass peaking out of the rubbles of the concrete. Next to the bench, a sunflower stands tall. Overhead, the security cameras are redesigned as potted plants and bird houses. The two residents are wearing colourful clothing. One has green dyed hair. They are wearing a green and yellow sweater vest with vertical stripes, a blue long sleeve shirt, yellow/orange pants with a stripe of green, and orange sneakers. The other one wears a red cap, jeans, and a purple jacket with a blue and pink heart on the back. The wall they face has been dismantled, and the wires overhead have disappeared. They are looking out towards a scene of birds, green mountains, blue sky, and white clouds.

In an article for the Halifax Examiner, El Jones (2019) details accounts by patients and staff at the East Coast Forensic Hospital that lay bare the intersection between incarceration and medicalization. Patients and former patients recount issues such as racism, inaccurate diagnoses, inconsistent treatment, arbitrary use of discipline, frequent strip searches, excessive surveillance, ambiguous release dates, solitary confinement, etc.. Four men had filed a habeas corpus application, detailing how they were mistakenly treated as drug traffickers and held extensively in segregation. Three of the four men were Black. Two months after Jones started working on the story, one of the four men, Greg Hiles, killed himself.

I spent years trying to make sense of my time in the psych ward, because how can something that so many authority figures told me was supposed to heal me feel so terrible? What does it mean when "care" is dealt out through surveillance, discipline, and containment? How can a place that people think of as a merciful alternative to prisons still enact the same violence? Anne Laura Stoler (2006, quoted by Jones, 2022) says that intimacy can still be "implicated in the exercise of power" (p.146). White women working in Residential Schools thought of themselves as caregivers for the children; doctors and nurses who turn their patients over to the police see themselves as defenders of public health; social workers who ransack the homes of Black mothers think they are doing their kids a favour (Jones, 2022). When carceral logic infiltrates acts of care, the prison reproduces itself.

Building restorative jails and hospital-cells will not set us free. In *Conviction*, Senator Kim Pate paces around the prison quad and tells the crew that twenty years ago, she may have suggested for the walls to be taken down, or asked for more windows and trees; now, she says it does not matter how nice you make it, a prison is still a prison (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019). In her office, Senator Pate pulls out the file for Creating Choices, a proposal for human-rights based, women-centric prisons tabled by the Federal Government in 1990. She says: "Every single one of these initiatives, before they were even finished being built, were becoming more and more prison-like" (1:08:41). Observing the reformist trend

of building "gender-responsive" prisons, Rose Braz (2006) astutely states: "...History teaches us better than anything else: if we build them, we will fill them" (p.87).

The transformation of East Coast Forensic Hospital tears through the façade of carceral intimacy. It follows no blueprint for the newest and shiniest iteration of the prison. Ivy is crawling up the walls. Grass is springing out of the cracks in the concrete. Wildflowers are creeping into every corner. The security cameras are smashed, repurposed as bird houses and flowerpots. A sunflower stands tall where the light cannot be obscured by walls. Two people walk side by side in their own clothes, looking at the green hills beyond the crumbling bricks. Abolitionist intimacies are the fungi that feasts upon the remains of the prison. With every fresh bud, every errant vine, and every creature scuttling into the crevices, this place is being messily, lovingly reclaimed.

I was lucky enough that my family moved into a house with a garden. Whenever I felt too choked up with despair and anxiety, I would go work outside. I let myself dig my fingers into the soil and breathe. It is the most gratifying thing to see how the garden transforms with each summer that passes, how much life this little piece of land can sustain. I cherished the feeling of the sun on my back and the warm breeze on my skin, which have become so rare since we moved from Southwestern China to Canada. My parents tell me about growing up in the 60s, and how every family planted *something* in whatever space they had. It allowed for people to be self-reliant during food shortages. We have always been able to nurture nourishment out of nooks and crannies. Cultivating and sharing our harvest is a practiced motion that feels like coming home.

During this time, I was slowly putting a name to all the ways I felt pain and despair, studying structures of oppression and how my struggles are inextricably connected with others'. More importantly, I was learning to organize, to be anchored in the world and to find hope in the stories of

resistance (like the ones I tell in these artworks about abolition). I understood that transforming a small plot of land is *still* a transformation, even if I cannot magically save an ecosystem.

But I've seen things come out of prison that I would call miraculous
Love, forgiveness, resilience, generosity, and thankfulness
What I know of being human comes from being a prison activist
To all my people doing time, thank you for making me compassionate
-El Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 2022, p. 201

I think of abolition as the process of rejuvenating a monocultural lawn. You turn over the grass or you mulch over it, and you reintroduce an array of native plants. You start to see the land come alive – more worms in the soil, more insects, more birds, more diverse plant life. When the thing that once monopolized the space is allowed to decay and decompose, new life forms blossom in its wake. If we discover beauty that emerges from the most barren soil, observe hope that springs from the bleakest place, and recognize intimacy that persists through the most devastating violence, then we can bring a better world into being.

Works Cited

- Ackerman, N., MacInnes, T., & Pahlke, A. (2019). *Conviction* [Video]. CBC Gem. <https://gem.cbc.ca/media/conviction/s01e01>
- Bousquet, T. (2018, September 12). Prisoners at the Burnside jail end 20-day strike, issue statement. *Halifax Examiner*. <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/uncategorized/prisoners-at-the-burnside-end-20-day-strike-issue-statement/>
- Braz, R. (2006). Kinder, gentler, gender responsive cages: Prison expansion is not prison reform [PDF file]. *Women, Girls, & Criminal Justice*, October/November Issue, 87-88 & 91. Retrieved from <https://criticalresistance.org/resources/kinder-gentler-gender-responsive-cages-2006/>
- Chartrand, V. (2019). Unsettled times: Indigenous incarceration and the links between colonialism and the penitentiary in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 61 (3), 67-89. DOI: 10.3138/cjccj.2018-0029
- Cowley, J. (2018, August 28). Former Burnside inmate speaks out about conditions amid protest. *CBC*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/former-burnside-inmate-jail-conditions-1.4801281>
- Durling, G. (2021, November 19). Impacts of the Ashley Smith Case on the Canadian Correctional System. *StFX Forensic Psychology*. <https://forensicpsychologystfx.ca/2021/11/19/impacts-of-the-ashley-smith-case-on-the-canadian-correctional-system/>
- Free Them All for Public Health: Free incarcerated people & keep everyone safe from COVID-19. (n.d.). *Free Them All 4 Public Health*. Retrieved November 25, 2022, from <https://freethemall4publichealth.org/>
- Harris, A. P. (2011). Heteropatriarchy kills: Challenging gender violence in a prison nation. *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy*, 37(13). https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_journal_law_policy/vol37/iss1/3
- Haymarket Books. (2022, October 26). *The Role of the State in Abolitionist Futures* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqaz90hfGhk>
- Hounsell, K (2015, August 7). 'Like losing a limb': Twin brother calls for change after sister's death in N.S. prison. *CTV*. <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/like-losing-a-limb-twin-brother-calls-for-change-after-sister-s-death-in-n-s-prison-1.2507614>
- Jones, E. (2018, August 19). The prisoners at the Burnside jail are engaged in a non-violent protest; here is their statement. *Halifax Examiner*. <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/government/province-house/the-prisoners-at-the-burnside-jail-are-engaged-in-a-non-violent-protest-here-is-their-statement/>
- Jones, E. (2019, August 29). What is going on at the East Coast Forensic Hospital? *Halifax Examiner*. <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/government/province-house/what-is-going-on-at-the-east-coast-forensic-hospital/>
- Jones, E. (2022). *Abolitionist intimacies*. Fernwood Publishing
- Kaba, M. (2021). *We do this 'til we free us*. Haymarket Books.
- Kilty, J.M. (2014). Examining the Psy-Carceral Complex in the death of Ashley Smith. In G. Comack & E. Balfour (Eds.), *Criminalizing women: Gender and (in)justice in neoliberal times* (2nd edition, pp. 236-254). Fernwood Press.
- Luck, S. (2016, October 24). Veronica Park had 'competent' care at Nova Institution prison: lawsuit defence. *CBC*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/veronica-park-nova-institution-death-1.3818775>
- Maynard, R. & Simpson, L. B. (2022). *Rehearsals for living*. Knopf Canada.

- Mulligan, P. (2019, January 16). Burnside jail so cold it's difficult to sleep, inmate says. *CBC*.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/central-nova-scotia-correctional-facility-heating-problem-1.4980227>
- Ryan, H. (2021, December 31). COVID-19 outbreak announced at Burnside jail, cases rise at women's prison. *CBC*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/covid-19-outbreak-announced-at-burnside-jail-cases-rise-at-women-s-prison-1.6301532>
- Senate of Canada. (2018, April 19). *Photo essay: Inside Canada's east coast prisons*.
<https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/>
- Shakur, A. (1999). *Assata: An autobiography*. Chicago Review Press, Incorporated.
- Simpson, L.B. (2017). *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Whynacht, A. (2021). *Insurgent love: Abolition and domestic homicide*. Fernwood Publishing.