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The International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA)

Exploring Dynamics and Controversies as observed at ICOPA 15 on Algonquin Territory

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Résumés

English Français
Drawing on debates observed at the fifteenth edition of the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) that took place on Algonquin Territory at the University of Ottawa in June 2014, reflections by ICOPA 15 organizing committee and research group members, and interviews with international conference participants, this qualitative study explores four recurring themes debated within this entity: allyship between reformers and abolitionists; the extent of race analysis in abolitionist conceptualization and strategy, as well as oppressed and privileged positions within ICOPA; the power equilibrium among survivors of state or social harm,

activists and academics; and deliberative vitality and decision-making within the organization. The exploration of ICOPA as a loose-knit initiative serves to elicit debate about the challenges of collective praxis in the face of co-optation, multiple oppressions, and unequal power structures shaping radical organizing and contemporary life more broadly.

La 15ᵉ Conférence internationale sur l'abolitionnisme pénal (ICOPA) s'est tenue sur territoire Algonquin à l'Université d'Ottawa en juin 2014. À partir des débats qui y furent observés, des réflexions de membres du comité organisateur et du groupe de recherche ICOPA 15, ainsi que d'entretiens auprès de participants internationaux, cette étude qualitative met en scène quatre enjeux récurrents qui l'ont traversée : les alliances entre les réformistes et les abolitionnistes; la place de la dimension raciale dans la conceptualisation et la stratégie abolitionniste, de même que la tension entre postures privilégiées et opprimées au sein d'ICOPA; l'équilibre des pouvoirs entre les survivants de torts sociaux ou étatiques, les militants et les universitaires; et la vitalité de la délibération et la prise de décision au sein de l'organisation. L'analyse d'ICOPA en tant que mouvement éclaté cherche à renouveler les débats autour d'une praxis collective consciente des risques de cooptation, des inégalités, et des structures de pouvoir asymétriques qui affectent autant l'organisation radicale elle-même qu'elle façonne l'ensemble des sociétés contemporaines.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : ICOPA, abolitionnisme pénal, criminalisation, réforme pénale, anarchisme
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Texte intégral

Abolition is a movement to end systemic violence, including the interpersonal vulnerabilities and displacements that keep the system going. In other words, the goal is to change how we interact with each other and the planet by putting people before profits, welfare before warfare, and life over death (Gilmore, 2014).

Introduction

1   For over thirty years, we have observed the ravages of neoliberalism where profit is privatized and debt is socialized. Neoliberal policies, in part responsible for the emergence of a risk society paradigm (Ericson, Haggerty, 1997), have propelled the criminalization of the poor, the marginalized, the dissenting and the 'Other' (see for instance, Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1998). This context has inspired contemporary radical organizing and mobilization on a wide range of

issues including heightened criminalization, migration, work, planetary devastation and corruption in all spheres. The penal abolitionist struggle, that seeks to eradicate oppressive penal regimes/structures and create a cohesive, safe society that accepts all, belongs to all and functions to serve all (Saleh-Hanna, 2008, 465), is one facet of radical organizing that finds commonality with other struggles for social justice.

2   The International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) is the only international penal abolition organization in the world.[1] Founded in 1983, it brings together penal abolitionists to share, analyze and strategize over the course of three days in a different country on a biennial basis. Participants at the conference include academics, survivors of state or social harm, and activists, many of whom are involved in local and national struggles to abolish the penal system in part or in whole, or other violent state-led practices that target specific groups and individuals. ICOPA has staged 15 conferences thus far. A location for the next iteration is usually decided at the closing plenary of each conference based on proposals received by participants who wish to bring the event to their locality. It is organized locally and brings a unique focus depending on the issues of concern in the new destination. The many different voices that it gathers contributes to the richness of the presentations, and brings to the fore the possibilities and challenges of living as abolitionists in a carceral world, and of strategizing to abolish penal systems. The ongoing renewal of participants is ensured by having the conference travel from one part of the world to another. This, in turn, promotes deliberative vitality in respect of abolition issues. It also brings to the fore areas of contention. Some of the conversations taking place today in ICOPA are apposite to other resistance groups, and include the best way to ally with non-abolitionists for common purposes or, abolition versus reform; the question of race, and the oppression-privilege converse; power dynamics in the academic-survivor-activist triune within ICOPA; and leadership, deliberative vitality and decision-making within ICOPA. Here we present some current and historical debates in ICOPA which can serve as a platform for continuing the conversation within ICOPA and contribute to ongoing conversations about resistance, allyship and change beyond this entity to participants' local social justice movements and organizing.

3   This article first presents the qualitative mixed method used to gather and consider input from a range of ICOPA actors. Then, we address each area of contention mentioned above by considering theoretical frames that assist in discerning the issues, identifying historical markers that inform our understanding of the fundamental questions that shape this entity, exploring how it affected the organization and unfolding of ICOPA 15,[2] and situating the contention within broader social justice debates. In conclusion, we present some of the initiatives proposed by various players to improve ICOPA's abolitionist agenda and work. We elaborate questions for reflection as a springboard for further conversation about the possibilities for deepening and energizing this abolitionist struggle. We also reflect on the ongoing and important work of abolishing the limitations of our own thinking and feeling processes to help us continue doing meaningful resistance work and create more gentle, solidary, community-driven responses to social problems outside ICOPA. We submit that this exploration further contributes to a critique of the punishment framework more broadly and the possibilities of considering an alternative approach within which to understand social harm. It also serves as an impetus to examine abolitionist principles and take stock of the challenges, successes and pitfalls of abolitionist organizing within and beyond this conference.[3]

I. Note on Method

4   Abolitionist struggle forces us to examine the practices we espouse in every facet of our lives. It is discordant to support penal abolition, on the one hand, and participate in punishment in other realms of action. This extends to the way we engage with others in deliberating the merits of retributive versus transformative justice.[4] As a result, we constantly struggle to engage in a praxis that is cohesive with our thrust toward such personal and social transformation. As Freire (Freire, 1972) notes, ...reflection –true reflection – leads to action...[and] when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection (75). According to Freire, revolution is achieved with praxis, meaning reflection and action are directed at the structures to be transformed (126). People become self-conscious and progressively transform their environment by their own praxis, and this is what Fals-Borda (Fals-Borda, Rahman, 1991) calls participatory action research (12). This qualitative research seeks to capture intersubjective knowledge about ICOPA from some of us who are committed to penal abolition praxis. We have chosen to do a collective research endeavor where the information is collected and systematized on a group basis, as well as a critical recovery of history and meaning to discover elements...which may be applied to the present struggles to increase conscientization (8). Understanding conscientization as a process of self-awareness-raising through collective self-inquiry and reflection allows for the exchange of knowledge (16).

5   We are engaged in a critical (Kincheloe, McLaren, 1998), auto-ethnographic (Anderson, 2006), participant-action research project (Fals-Borda, Rahman, 1991; Mathiesen, 1974), in which we see ourselves as co-researchers. Kincheloe, McLaren (1998, 264) consider that:

> Critical research can best be understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness. Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world.

6   At the outset, we chose a combined approach to collecting data, encompassing a self-reflexive, dialogical element to elucidate how local organizing unfolded (Freire, Bergman Ramos, 1972; Gomez et al., 2011) and semi-structured interviews with international ICOPA participants[5] who have a history of involvement with the entity, in order to garner a sense of ICOPA dynamics based on their perceptions.

7   The practice of auto-ethnographic inquiry enables us, as complete member researchers (CMR) to combine our researcher and subject roles to produce written text about the topic under consideration in a self-reflexive manner (Anderson, 2006; Denzin, Lincoln, 2000). We are also inspired by a critical communicative methodology (CCM) (Gómez et al., 2011). This approach, developed by Jesus Gómez (ibid.), draws its inspiration from Paulo Freire (Freire, Bergman Ramos, 1972; Freire, Macedo, 1985). It focuses on dialogism, essentially that communicative rationality is based on dialogue:

> ...social situations depend on meanings constructed through social interaction, and therefore reality does not exist

independently from the subjects who experience it. From this perspective, "objectivity" is reached through "intersubjectivity" between researchers and the social actors involved in the reality studied (Gómez et al., 2011, 236).

8   First, the initiators of the project, Claire Delisle and Maria Basualdo, recruited a portion of ICOPA 15's organizing committee's membership. They did this by inviting all members to voluntarily take part. Of the group, six of us committed to participating in the research (two activists and four academic-activists). We chose to do this collaboratively, with C. Delisle and M. Basualdo being responsible for obtaining the authorization of the University of Ottawa Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, organizing reflection meetings, inciting the research group to focus on their thoughts and feelings on how the organizing process was unfolding. We recorded these meetings and analyzed them. Second, we asked the remaining members of the organizing committee to vet questions and then fill out a questionnaire on their experience as organizers of ICOPA 15. Third, we approached 14 ICOPA members who had either longstanding ICOPA experience, or who had been present at ICOPA since 2010 and who were familiar with the most recent events and conversations. Of this number, 13 responded positively, but one was not available. Of the 12 remaining, we asked a number of questions pertaining to their conceptualization of ICOPA, how decisions are made, how knowledge is transferred, and their hopes for ICOPA. From these general questions emerged the four themes under consideration. This data was analyzed from written transcripts of the interviews.

II. ICOPA's Areas of Contention

9   Based on the reflexive exercise and interviews set out above, we focus on four recurring conversations within ICOPA, that form longstanding questions of debate and that, from time to time, are heightened by participant deliberations both in formal parts of the conference, as well as during more informal conversations. We present each below, drawing on theoretical considerations as we address how the debate has played out over the years, and how it manifested during ICOPA 15 organization and staging. For each of these, there is relevance to broader social justice issues. Moreover, other social justice movement analysis (Critical Resistance, No One is Illegal, CIRCA) is juxtaposed to some themes as a way to discover and deepen thought and action within ICOPA.

1) Reform versus Abolition

10   It is important to make a distinction between two separate issues: Abolitionists engaging in short-term coalitions with reformists in particular campaigns on the ground and the space that reform-oriented presentations should be allotted within ICOPA. On this latter point, the contention is situated around the feasibility of including reformers in order to undertake an educational function of presenting abolition as a sound response to analyses of penality, thereby extending their reform orientation in an abolitionist direction. We focus first on the abolition versus reform connundrum on the ground, then look at openness toward reformers within ICOPA.

1.1. Theoretical Considerations

11   Sudbury (2009) distinguishes between anti-prison activists / movements and those who work towards reforming the criminal justice system, who usually work for non-profit organizations. While non-profit organizations / workers can have an influence on government policy, they are not able to facilitate radical social change (Sudbury, 2009, 26). The difference between the two groups lies in who makes them up. Anti-prison movements tend to include communities and people with experiences of criminalization and punishment who see the penal system as a form of racialized state violence that must be dismantled (ibid.). Reform groups, on the other hand, are usually made up of paid employees of non-profit organizations who tend to focus their work towards small improvements.

12   Compared to reformers, who use the language of the state, abolitionists promulgate new ways of seeing and counter issues such as the widely perceived "necessity" of prisons. This is achieved by introducing linguistic concepts which in time can become mainstream. One example of this is Critical Resistance's[6] introduction of the term "prison industrial complex" (PIC) in 1998, which, in time has become accepted by many, including Democrat politicians, as a useful term to describe the for-profit penal system (Sudbury, 2009).

13   While a central goal is prison abolition, activists do sometimes work with prisoners or ex-prisoners to improve conditions of confinement. These could be considered reform goals, but they can differ from those targeted by reformers. Mathiesen (2015) draws on Gorz' (1964) notion of non-reformist reforms to denote reforms that may facilitate the improvement of conditions for those incarcerated but which do not entrench, expand or bolster the penal system (231). For example, when drawing attention to prison crowding, one must be cautious not to fall into the trap of allying with those who propose building more prisons. Another danger of reform work is that well intentioned and potentially beneficial reforms can be co-opted by the system (Mathiesen, 2015, 1974). As Piché (2009) describes, efforts to include restorative justice programs in Canadian penitentiaries have not yielded the desired outcomes; rather, restorative justice has been co-opted and used in a punitive manner. This is where the difference between reformers and abolitionists becomes evident. While reformers might inadvertently frame issues in such a way that the only possible solutions involve expanding the penal system, abolitionists work towards dismantling the perceived need for a penal system. Part of the latter group's work is to incite discussion and show that prisons are not necessary in the quest for increased security (Sudbury, 2009). For example, the recent move towards closing prisons in California and amending parole conditions that facilitated people's return to prison for breaches, was in part due to the work of prison abolitionists who aligned with state representatives and proposed that closing prisons made fiscal sense. This would not be possible, Sudbury (2009) argues, without the work of anti-prison activists who have fought for, and provided a vision of a world where more prisons does not equal more security.

14   The very nature of abolitionist philosophy requires time to process, thereby making it a challenging philosophy to appropriate. Reform, on the other hand, can give someone the opportunity to feel like they are doing good, while not really confronting the fallacious and detrimental nature of the system's underpinnings. However, this can be a tricky endeavor (see Walia, 2013, 177). It is difficult for penal abolitionists to ally with reformers or groups that focus on specific abolitions (such as the death penalty) because while the goal may be a good one, the discursive strategies of reformists may be in direct opposition to a penal abolitionist philosophy. For instance, in the US, death penalty

abolitionists have campaigned to get rid of such a barbaric practice, and have made gains in many states. However, in trying to persuade in favour of abolishing the death penalty, they have held up LWOPs (Life Without Parole) as a sound alternative, thereby obliterating the continuity between prison and death. As McCann (2013) notes, ...a consideration of crime and history in America (sic)[7] demonstrates that the prison and the execution chamber are inextricably bound to each other (189).

15   Yet, for some abolitionists, it remains essential to build strategic alliances with reform campaigns, in order to address immediate lived harm, without diluting our abolitionist principles: A genuine radical imagination holds space for those who have not yet come to adopt the entirety of our worldviews, and sees those close to us as potential allies, rather than enemies (Russell, Goldberg, in Walia, 2013, 177).

1.2. Historical Markers

16   Although openness towards reformers is not always evident among participants, there are moments when the issue is debated. For instance, in Indiana in 1991, ICOPA V adopted a resolution that went so far as to include officials working within penal systems. The resolution stated that ICOPA was "a forum for the exchange of ideas between reformers, academics, activists, officials working within the criminal justice system and victims and victimizers seeking to identify and reach agreement on alternative ways of dealing with crime other than simply punishing and putting perpetrators behind bars" (ICOPA VI Conference Overview).

17   ICOPA XII, which was organized by the Howard League for Penal Reform in London (United Kingdom), illustrated the tension around this issue. As the organization's name suggests, it was reformist in orientation and this was apparent in the program. The audience was made up of penal practitioners and policy makers, as well as penal abolitionists. The Universal Carceral (UC) Colloquium was organized within this conference by a Canadian contingent in an effort to counter-balance what they perceived as a reform agenda. The UC space addressed "the many-layered nature of the carceral archipelago – and its integration with various systems of control and processes of normalization" (Justice Action). Presentations were made in support of Thomas Mathiesen's Unfinished (see Mathiesen, 1974, 2014) aiming at short-term negative reforms such as the closing of a particular institution or the elimination of a particular policy; and of targeted action such as carceral eradication strategies, engaging "the rest of the left" in penal abolitionism and an emphasis on public engagement and civic responsibility (Justice Action, op.cit.). The colloquium portion of ICOPA XII was well-attended by longstanding ICOPA participants, but not by the Howard League participants, giving the impression that two different conferences were being held.

18   At ICOPA 14 held in Trinidad & Tobago in 2012, the proximity between local organizers and penal system players exacerbated the tension between participants who adopt a more ardent abolitionist stance (wary of content presented by reformers) and those who consider that reform is a path on the journey toward abolition and who therefore view engagement with system players as less problematic (June 14a, July 2a, July 14b). [8] For this and other reasons,[9] there was a relatively small international turnout. It is safe to say that, for the most part, those whose stance on abolition is stauncher did not attend.

19   Those who did attend seem to be relatively open to the idea of being inclusive of not-yet-abolitionists. As one person put it, "...reform is a stage towards abolitionism, so it is not contradictory. I know no abolitionist who wasn't a reformist before" (June 14). Another said, "I know there are abolitionists out there who are part of the system and maybe it's not safe for them to be in conversation with us, but I'd sure like to see that happen, that's one of my dreams" (July 2a). On the third day of the conference, a great deal of reformist content was on the agenda, and the conference took place inside a prison where both staff and prisoners participated, which exacerbated this tension further. Prisoners were encouraged to participate in front of guards who were also encouraged to participate. On this alone, one person commented: "Because of the fucked-up power relations involved, can a prisoner really speak freely in such a setting?" (July 18).

1.3. ICOPA 15 and Abolition versus Reform

20   The result of having witnessed a few ICOPAs from near or far, and experiencing how debate over issues plays out in this forum, greatly assists in avoiding certain pitfalls in organizing ICOPA. At the outset, wanting to ensure an abolitionist flavour, the ICOPA 15 organizing committee accepted all proposals that were abolitionist in nature. It was a central question of this committee that no one mistake the conference agenda for a reform agenda. Having done that seemed to give a greater voice to abolitionists. On the other hand, whilst ICOPA 14 had race diversity but the thrust was reformist, here the thrust was abolitionist, but participants of colour were fewer. This speaks to a number of overlapping problems: ICOPA 14 had the participation of people of colour, but who seemed to emanate from the governmental or academic establishment. The program, therefore, was reformist in orientation. It is unclear on what grounds either prisoners or their minders were invited to attend the conference. But at the very least, it would seem that grassroots organizers and activists were largely absent from the conference. This situation demonstrates the complexity of tackling certain issues (race diversity, educating prison officials on the problematic nature of incarceration) whilst hindering progress on other issues (abolition, and empowered grassroots ownership).

21   Having been responsible for organizing the Universal Carceral Colloquium at ICOPA XII, C. Delisle and J. Piché were particularly keen on preserving an abolitionist discourse throughout the conference. It was from this vantage point that the proposals for panels and presentations were vetted. In the interest of promoting such a perspective, we made special call-outs to organizations both in Canada and the US who were grassroots and penal abolitionist in perspective. In this respect, we are satisfied that the conference was an abolition conference, with presentations that were respectful of such an approach. This may have resulted in some reformers not taking part in ICOPA 15.

22   Those espousing a pure abolitionist stance want ICOPA to be a safe space and a space where the basics of abolition do not need to be rehashed at every conference, a situation likely to be present if the conference is open to reformers (June 25, July 18). Because of the high volume of presentations around lived experience, one comrade suggested an "advanced abolition track" in the program, a place devoted to deepening abolitionist analysis and strategy (June 25). On the other hand, there are abolitionists who consider it desirable, even essential, that conversations with reformers take place as a way to advance the abolition movement, and also in order to benefit from closer ties with reform allies. After all, for some, reformers are not the enemy (June 14a, July 2a, July 14b).

23   This topic is divisive within the ranks of ICOPA. The refusal of some stalwart abolitionists to attend ICOPA 14 speaks to the gulf between the 'no-compromise' and the 'open-to-reformers' abolitionists. More generally, it is about the development of abolitionist analysis. Referring to ICOPA, one international comrade said,

> I come into that space, like, I want to have my mind blown about abolition. I want to really engage in that, and get my thinking really advanced in that way. And so those moments like hearing Thomas Mathiesen speak, that kind of stuff is really juicy for me. Whereas hearing the eight or nine million different ways in which solitary confinement kills people or whatever, also has value but doesn't necessarily advance my thinking about abolition. (June 25)

24   The notion that ICOPA should be open to reformers is one upon which participants have reflected for some time, for instance at ICOPA V (see above). What needs to be clarified is how abolitionists should engage with reformers. It is one thing to be open to a range of participants in ICOPA in order for them to learn about abolition. It may be desirable that reform-minded people and abolitionists form alliances and present their research, or their experience on some short-term negative reforms. What troubles pure abolitionists is the prospect of watering down of abolitionist principles at an abolitionist conference by accepting presentations that are clearly not abolitionist in outlook. One way for ICOPA participants to revisit this question is to devote some time at ICOPA 16 to presenting differing views on this issue. Notwithstanding the concern within ICOPA, abolitionists' commitment to the struggle should include engaging reformers on questions of abolition in an open and sustained fashion beyond ICOPA conferences.

1.4. Broader Considerations on Abolition versus Reform

25   A distinction should be made between coping with a reform agenda within ICOPA and being open to reform-oriented participants. ICOPA is not the only space where these questions are raised. In the organization No One Is Illegal[10] developing relationships with other groups and strategizing with them on mutual areas of interest is essential. Walia (2013) notes, it is imperative for movements to break out of our activist bubbles and identify what tangible impacts we can have within broader communities and what victories we can leverage that will bring us closer to our vision of freedom, liberation and self-determination (176-177). However, it is essential to clearly set out our principles of abolition when engaging with others. The use of intentional language is one way to shift the conversation (see Walia, 2013, 181-182). Within migrant justice activism, Walia insists that highlighting the moral illegitimacy of state practices is an essential part of preserving and fighting for the abolition of borders. We are essentially talking about reform versus revolution (182). In unpacking the tension at the heart of these approaches, Walia (2013) says: Within this debate, reformist strategies are denounced for engaging state institutions, while revolutionary strategies are criticized for existing entirely outside and in confrontation with the state (ibid.). Using Mathiesen's logic of the unfinished, reformism is a competing agreement, in that while the message may be suggested, it is integrated within the language and mores of the state. Revolution, on the other hand, is foreign in that it cannot be integrated within the existing system. We should ensure that it competes as well as contradicts, however (see Mathiesen, 2015), and compels us to carefully consider how we frame abolition, in terms of our discursive techniques.

26   While ICOPA is concerned with the abolition of penal systems, other groups are also trying to abolish, whether it be the abolition of borders or the state in toto. Whatever the target of our resistance, we not only stand to gain ground by allying with others on specific campaigns, but it remains imperative that our goal be to get our message out more broadly. To do this, we must not only develop strategies of persuasion, but listen to and hear the preoccupations of others who are not in agreement with us (Walia, 2013, 176-188). To build solidarities with a wider contingent, we must avoid "preaching to the converted", and be engaged in authentic interaction so as to deepen solidarities, as well as expand and multiply fields of resistance and disturbance.

2) Race Oppression and White Privilege

27   There is a general consensus about the systemic nature of racism in punitive state practices and institutions among ICOPA penal abolitionists. However, within ICOPA, the lack of visibility, representation, and centrality of people of colour is contested; as is the perceived lack of consideration for race in abolitionist analysis within ICOPA. Attention is drawn to it as a means of confronting the oppression-privilege converse. Historically, the tension around this issue has surfaced from time to time within the conference.

2.1. Theoretical Considerations

28   In Counter-Colonial Criminology, Agozino (2003) draws a clear link between social control and colonialist domination. Therein, he performs a mammoth deconstruction of criminology as …a tool for imperialist domination, along with [o]ther technologies of domination crafted by imperialism such as the army, the police and the prison (228). We are also influenced by Lukayo Estrella's (2015) anti-oppression workshops, which are grounded in part on Andrea Smith's (n.d.) Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing. Having listened to key informants' understanding of this issue within ICOPA prompted us to delve more deeply into the race oppression and white privilege debate by attending Estrella's workshops. We take as a starting point that privilege is something with which each owner must reckon. It is not enough to possess privilege and believe that one is in a neutral position vis-à-vis the question of race oppression. Acknowledging privilege can assist in developing a different "listening" of others' thoughts and feelings around oppression. We also draw upon the writings of Cannon (2012) and bell hooks (1988) on the necessity of addressing white privilege. As hooks reminds us,

> Where [black] people are called upon to take primary responsibility for sharing experiences, ideas, and information [they are placed] once again in a service position, meeting the needs of whites (hooks, 1988, 47, in Cannon, 2012, 21).

29   While the question has surfaced regularly with ICOPA, we argue that anti-oppression work has been lacking. In Undoing Border Imperialism, Walia (2013) considers that such work is a necessary part of movement building and strengthening alliances (187). Yet, she cautions against a "race to the bottom" when approaching oppression as a

checklist. She reminds us that while some have more oppressions, they are not necessarily worse off (189). To illustrate, she reflects on the fact that while a straight white cisgendered man may seem to have privilege compared to someone who has more forms of oppression, if he is homeless, he may face a harsher reality than those who have more forms of oppression with which to contend (189).

30   Although Walia raises many problems with how one approaches anti-oppression work, one of the issues that is pertinent for ICOPA is the question of representation. Ensuring more oppressed identities are participating in a movement or campaign can be superficial and a tokenistic veneer of diversity [that] replicates models of assimilation, and does little to reframe our activism within oppressed people's own analysis and experiences (191). One way to avoid this is to have oppressed communities in the leadership of our movements (ibid.).

2.2. Historical Markers

31   The issue of participation by people of colour and also the space dedicated in the ICOPA program to resisting racialized oppression has been around a long time. This conflict was felt most acutely when ICOPA IX returned to Toronto in 2000. Bitterness over this unresolved episode continues to haunt ICOPA and was keenly felt at the closing plenary of ICOPA 15. Notably, ICOPA IX was attended by a United States contingent from the organization Critical Resistance. Angela Davis, a leading voice in the fight against the prison industrial complex (PIC) in the US, and founding member of Critical Resistance critiqued the "racial homogeneity" and "related failure to incorporate an analysis of race" in ICOPA's abolitionist framework (Davis, in Davis & Rodriguez, 2000). One of our key informants noted:

> ...a conversation on racism that included a discussion that is centered on how the oppression operates on the part of the oppressor, is a really sane conversation to have, though it was controversial in ICOPA; people didn't want to have those conversations...regarding ICOPA. They were comfortable talking about how racist the system was, but not be able to confront the fact that ICOPA was dominantly a white space. (July 14a)

32   This critique left a bitter taste for some with longstanding ICOPA experience. The latter consider that the organization is always concerned with different forms of oppression, be it about race, class, or patriarchy, and can in fact point to numerous conferences that have included panels on issues of race. They also do not feel that those critiquing ICOPA as a mostly white space at the time actually took into account the contingent of Indigenous peoples and the focus on the struggles they face at ICOPA IX.

33   Those frustrated with the paucity of representation of people of colour at ICOPA IX wanted more focus on their mass incarceration in places like the United States and their disproportionate representation in many prisons across the world, including in Canada. According to Saleh-Hanna (2008), efforts to bring in stronger African and African American representation resulted in the decision to hand ICOPA over to Nigerian representatives and was met with much resistance and fear (468). She then adds that most ICOPA participants were in favour of the Nigeria destination. ICOPA did go to Nigeria in 2002 and was a successful first in Africa (ibid., 470-488), organized by PRAWA, a non-

governmental organization aimed at promoting security, justice and development in Africa (PRAWA.org) and Viviane Saleh-Hanna herself.

34   It bears noting that ICOPA has traditionnally been mindful of indigenous representation. For instance, ICOPA III in Montreal, ensured that Indigenous people were at the center of organizing and at the center of the conference. Anishnabe elder, the late Art Solomon, a fierce advocate for Indigenous prisoners, was a key organizer for ICOPA since its inception. The Leonard Peltier Defense Committee and other Indigenous abolitionists like the late Patricia Monture were also in attendance and presented papers. ICOPA IX in Toronto had strong indigenous representation, a fact that some say is forgotten by those who speak of the non-representativeness of ICOPA. The organizers of the ICOPA editions in Australia and New Zealand were also mindful of indigenous presence and representation.

35   On one hand, there are participants who believe themselves to be non-racist and who take exception to having to bear the onus of the whiteness of ICOPA. According to some of them, there is a desire to reach out and be "inclusive" of people of colour, but if the latter do not want to participate, there is little they can do to change the situation.[11] On the other hand, there are people in ICOPA who believe that the very notion of trying to be "inclusive" is a testament to white supremacy and privilege, and wish to find an alternative vocabulary that might better translate the openness and outreach that is needed toward communities of colour (July 14a) (see also Cannon, 2012). If ICOPA participants do not take seriously the issue of white privilege,[12] ICOPA's and their own, it puts the onus on (the few) people of colour in attendance to do this work (hooks, 1984). Those who wish to have an honest discussion about white privilege and the paucity of participation from persons of colour are thus put in the uncomfortable position of bringing it up with others who are perceived by them to be closed-minded. The same goes for issues of class, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, ageism and so forth. It is imperative that abolitionists grasp the significance of this issue and how simply being a person of colour can make one a target of state repression. The privilege one garners by being white is largely due to ongoing and unresolved colonial practices (July 14a). Because the bulk of those who are criminalized emanate from marginalized communities (often persons of colour), it is incumbent upon penal abolitionists to incorporate race in their analysis in a more systematic fashion, and to be concerned about the centrality of race in our day-to-day interactions and our organizing strategies. Racism and colonialism continue to structure our day-to-day lives, as do classism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression. While ICOPA has consistently given centrality to these issues where Indigenous peoples are concerned, developing a penal abolition strategy that is framed within a more complete analysis of racism and colonialism may help to push the conversation forward. We take heed of Cannon's (2012) and Estrella's (2015) call for confronting positionality and addressing privilege in our relations with oppressed others.

2.3. ICOPA 15 and Race Oppression and White Privilege

36   The organizing committee of ICOPA 15 made outreach efforts toward groups with a preponderance of people of colour, in an effort to try to bring them into the ICOPA fold. One comrade in particular recognized these efforts, and focused on the overlap of different areas of internal struggle, namely the triune and the race oppression issues:

> I think he [Justin] really worked hard at trying to get a local organizing committee that was diverse and represented

different experiences. I just don't think that happened, despite his outreach efforts. And I think some of that has to do with the reputation of ICOPA. And also that people don't really know about it and that it's held in academic institutions often, and so it's partly associated with academia and with white academia (July 7).

37   Another also recognized efforts to have a racially diverse participation:

I thought that the work that went into the lead-up to it was much more soliciting of different kinds of participation and inclusive and open, maybe that's the way to say it. It was much more open than my experience has been at other ones where it's kind of like a call for papers goes out and you just submit something or you don't. So I mean there were cycles of "Hey, we really want to solicit input and participation from imprisoned people, can you circulate this specific call out for that to them" and reminders about getting that stuff in. Calls for participation, you know, more general call for papers that went out...And I know that efforts were made also to talk to Black Canadians and other communities that are impacted by imprisonment there (June 25).

38   The closing plenary is devoted to evaluating the current conference, selecting a site for the next event, and adopting resolutions. By the afternoon of the third day of ICOPA 15 some participants had already left, and those present usually experience fatigue after an intense three-day schedule. The nature of deliberative communication in ICOPA is based on a consensus model, meaning that areas of disagreement can take-up considerable time before being resolved, if at all.

39   Despite the manifestation of significant interest from various participants to host future conferences, the site for the next conference was left in limbo. The conference ended without having selected a site for the following conference, even though a proposal from Dartmouth, Massachusetts had been submitted, albeit asking for a three-year gap until the next iteration. Meanwhile two participants had expressed an interest in staging ICOPA 16 in Turkey in 2016, but neither of them were present at the plenary and no solid proposal had been submitted. There was also a firm proposal to hold ICOPA in the United Kingdom in 2018. Lastly, as a result of the discussion on site selection and appropriateness, a last-minute suggestion to stage the conference in Ecuador was presented verbally pending more discussion among Ecuadorian activists and scholars.

40   The discussion around where to stage ICOPA 16 was crossed with the discussion about race oppression and white privilege. After Viviane Saleh-Hanna proposed that ICOPA 16 be held in 2017 at the University of Massachusetts where she is affiliated, discussion began about the appropriateness of having a conference in the United States for several reasons: the proposal was for 2017, rather than 2016, entailing a three-year gap to the next edition; Massachusetts was very close to the site of ICOPA 15 and it was felt that efforts should be made to take the conference to a site away from Turtle Island (North America) or Europe; and more importantly for a few present, there was a fear that sending it to the United States would be an impetus to concentrate on racism and racialization to the detriment of a broader analysis on penal abolition that encompasses other forms of oppression.

41   In addition, the issue of the lack of racial diversity prompted the representative of the Foundation for a Prisonless Society (FPS is the entity established by Ruth Morris to fund ICOPA) to remark that the entity was considering whether to continue funding ICOPA given the paucity of representation of people of colour. The issue of race oppression continued to occupy the attention of participants. Some adopted the stance that racialization and colonialism are restrictive as prisms through which to analyze abolition and that all forms of oppression need to feature in our

deliberations. Indeed, in an article on academic and activist relations, Routledge (2009) says that power negotiations involve working through the distances created by culture, space, and positionality (88). While race is a significant component of these broad concepts, these differentials are also not exclusively due to race/colour, but involve a spectrum of overlapping issues (such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class). One way to engender a broader discussion of abolitionism could be to encourage future ICOPAs being hosted outside of Europe or North America, to ensure a greater global diversity. One participant suggested looking into the possibility of having an ICOPA in Brazil or South Africa, and another suggested organizing one in Ecuador, which, as it turns out, is the next destination (see ([www.actionicopa.org]).

42   Notwithstanding criticism around homogeneity and privilege, ICOPA 15's program on Day 2 was exclusively focused on a stream of panels devoted to racism and colonialism, Indigenous peoples, and immigration detention, and another stream on international perspectives, which encompassed presentations dealing with slavery and colonialism. Further, The Shadow of Lucasville, a film about wrongfully imprisoned African-American Keith LaMar, screened that evening. It focused on LaMar's wrongful and unending segregation for his role in the Lucasville riot in the United States (LaMar, 2014). In this respect, racialization and colonialism were a central part of the ICOPA 15 program. In addition, Bob Gaucher and Claire Delisle met with local elders to gain their support for the conference and two elders participated in the opening plenary, Albert Dumont who opened the conference with an indigenous prayer and Claudette Commanda who spoke on the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people in Canada. Efforts were also made to acknowledge the unceded and unsurrendered Algonquin Territory on which the conference was held and to honour the traditional stewards of the land, though this recognition was not a systematic part of each panel opening.

43   It is incumbent on ICOPA to continue to ensure that groups who are most impacted by state repression be integral to the deliberations. As Routledge (2009) has discussed, activists and activist-academics need to contend with issues of power and relational ethics, as well as recognize their personal political responsibility (83). While compassion and a desire to create change are integral components of collective action and solidarity work, a key part is to reflect on the role privilege (in terms of racial, genderist, classist, or other positions of power) has on our ability to advocate for and enact such change. Cannon (2012) further points out, in reference to indigenous struggle in Canada, Canadians must come to know and understand the privilege of not having to know, name, or otherwise mark their own subjectivity and positionality relative to the ongoing project of settler colonialism (22). Sound allyship to groups suffering oppression necessitates that attention be focused on putting aside "unknowing" and listening to what people who suffer oppression are trying to say about power differentials and act accordingly.

2.4. Broader Considerations on Race Oppression and White Privilege

44   There is catastrophic and ongoing systemic racism in many parts of the world, in large part an ongoing consequence of colonialism and neoliberalism. In a world where tens of millions of people are displaced due to conflict and persecution, all those working to abolish penal systems or other state underpinnings designed to bolster capital interests at the expense of entire categories of human beings need to constantly adjust, re-think, and re-group in order

to avoid falling into the trap of complicity. Our very conceptions of justice require us to undertake and continue an ongoing process of reframing issues using an anti-oppression lens (Walia, 2013, 191). It is vital for ICOPA's penal abolition movement to re-visit its practices to ensure that those most impacted by colonial practices of caging and control are central to abolitionist organizing. And whereas it would be a shame to replicate hierarchies of who is most oppressed, or to minimize oppression, Walia calls on us to consistently challenge oppression with the goal of achieving genuine trust and equity in our relations (ibid., 194, emphasis in the original). In this respect the work done to date by organizations like No One is Illegal and the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) in Canada are exemplars of the kind of commitment and transformative work needed to undertake the monumental task of ridding our societies of penal frameworks that control, cage and kill. The first step in this process is for those who have privilege to take stock of their positionality, to listen, to learn from, and direct resources to oppressed groups themselves, a necessary first step to meaningful allyship.

3) Power Dynamics in the Academic-Survivor-Activist Triune

45   Within ICOPA, there is a perceived power differential in the triune of ICOPA participants (academics – survivors of state or social harm – activists).[13] On one hand, it is imperative that those who are survivors play a central role in ICOPA. Efforts must be engaged to ensure that prisoners and former prisoners, as well as survivors of social harm, who tend not to have the same organizational resources, be a vital part of the conference agenda. On the other hand, it is felt by some that academics, who often have an abundance of resources, tend to have more leverage to organize ICOPAs, and thus the conference space and content can appear and feel like a traditional academic conference. This can alienate non-academics. Further, since it is often held on university campuses, this can further alienate the non-academic contingent who may find that the space promotes hierarchical relations as the University is considered by some to be a bastion of privilege, often belonging to white men.

3.1. Theoretical Considerations

46   We draw on an anarchist perspective to understand struggles and relationship within them.[14] We espouse Heckert's (2010) notion of anarchism as an ethics of relationships (186), which allows us to understand that domination such as is found in whiteness, masculinity, and so forth, is rooted in individualism (189). Our own empowerment and the ability to organize are inter-related, as well as dependent on relationships with ourselves and with others (190). Writings concerned with anarchism and leadership (Gordon, 2005), and ethics in struggle (Routledge, 2009), stand to best help us conceptualize ICOPA dynamics.

47   Gordon (2005) asserts that concerns about leadership are really about the distribution of power, as well as autonomy and solidarity (131). It is the concept of power, therefore, that is the crux of organizing. He uses Starhawk's (1987) three-pronged conceptualization of power: power over, which is achieved through domination (9); power-from-within, which

has to do with the sense of mastery such as we develop as children, and which extends to realms of creativity and connection to others (9); and power-with which refers to the influence we can exert in a group of equals, our power to shape the group's course and shift its direction (10; 268).

48   If we focus on power-with, equality among members is an important aspect of this type of power. Gordon suggests, however, that it is wrong to assume equality among members (155). To do so would mean to ignore the differential skills, resources, recognition and support [activists] need in order to be effective and feel valued (156). For Gordon, differences in resources affect the ability to have power-with (160). He divides these resources into two basic typologies: zero sum resources and non zero-sum resources. Zero-sum resources are things like money, space, time and logistical equipment that are difficult to duplicate or share amongst a group. By contrast, non zero-sum resources like information, skills, access to networks and publicity are more easily shared or duplicated. Other resources, such as commitment, energy and personality traits, are also "non zero-sum" resources, but are harder to duplicate (161). Below we explore social dynamics and see how these different resources play a crucial role in who "has more listening" (July 2), and thus is more influential.

49   Looking at communicative relations within ICOPA also brings us to explore the group's impetus for personal and community transformation. In more conventional studies on social movements, leadership and influence, the personal is often evacuated by theories that focus on leader-follower relations, to the detriment of intra-member or a member-to-member acknowledgement and understanding. Given that ICOPA is composed of activists and activist-academics (criminalized or not; victimized or not), Routledge's (2009) reflections on these relations through his involvement in CIRCA (Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army) informs our understanding of the impetus for questioning the power dynamic and decision-making mechanisms within the ICOPA entity.

50   CIRCA began in response to the 2005 G8 summit held in Gleaneagles, Scotland and "had suddenly risen up from nowhere and was everywhere" (83). The name CIRCA was chosen to reflect that they considered themselves "approximate and ambivalent and neither here nor there", but nonetheless in a place of ultimate power, "the place in-between order and chaos" (ibid.).[15] Such ambivalence toward an established mandate is similar in ICOPA, where beyond the push for penal abolition analysis and strategizing through the staging of a biennial conference, the group is devoid of action plans, and formal end-of-term accounts and reports (although some are produced periodically after conferences).

51   Routledge begins by asserting that activist-academics' relations with activists in struggle necessitates ...action, reflection, and empowerment (of oneself and others)... in resistance to oppression (82). He teases out an approach for the considered relationship between the activist-academic and resisting others, and the ensuing possibility of active resistance to oppression and domination. Such collaboration of activist-academics with resisting others involves participating in "spaces of action that are inclusive and anti-hierarchical" (83).[16]

52   While direct action is certainly the mainstay of some activist-academics, Routledge underlines that there are myriad ways in which academics can make themselves relevant in collaborative endeavors to end oppression and domination, ways that blur the boundaries between full-time activists and academic researchers who choose...to work in, and with, particular communities (83).

53   The contours of activist methodologies can and should be worked out in cooperation with activists themselves. Doing

this will necessarily entail being faced with issues of power, ethics, and personal political responsibility (83). Routledge proposes a methodological manifesto based on his involvement in CIRCA that incorporates activism (which he characterizes as living theory beyond words), affinity, emotion and relational ethics (ibid.).

54   Common values about non-hierarchical and participatory consensus decision-making call for flexible and fluid modes of action, and such a politics of affinity constitutes a structure of feeling (85). So developing close interpersonal relationships assists in creating bonds of solidarity to imagine global subjectivities that call for an appreciation of similarity and difference. More to the point, such a "structure of feeling" stretches the limits of our understanding of others' struggles. Brainstorming, strategizing and arguing for one action or another, puts us in face-to-face encounters that enable the embodying of affinity (86).

55   Emotions are also an important part of the equation. We become politically involved when we feel something, like injustice or oppression, and this sparks our motivation to engage in politics. For Routledge and CIRCA, it was a key to transforming and sustaining the inner emotional life of the activists involved. He says that there is a destructive tendency in many movements in that they forget the importance of the inner work of personal transformation and healing. The emotional life of activists is also a site of struggle, he claims (87). For CIRCA "clownbatants", their group and their action were an attempt to change the way we feel and the way we struggle (87). It is understood that the creative process is aided when one's emotional journey is given a voice and a space.

56   The benefits of cultivating a conversation about ethics in political activism include cultivating ...relations of honesty, truth and interpersonal acknowledgement; it allows us ...to build a genuine moral language; and it helps us ...become more fully conscious human beings (Routledge, 2009, 88). Self-consciousness, we are reminded, is self-knowledge, understanding one's past and one's present, desires, fears and needs, and one's relationship to the larger world (ibid.). This is helpful in the ...articulation of a temporary common ground, wherein relations of difference and power (for example, concerning gender, age, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and so on) are negotiated across distances of culture, space, and positionality in the search for mutual understanding (88). Undertaking a process of decolonizing one's self and abdicating the role of expert is one of the benefits of retaining relational ethics as part of our ongoing demeanor in struggle.

3.2. Historical Markers

57   It was at ICOPA II in Amsterdam in 1985, that the representativeness of ICOPA was first brought into question. That conference was dominated by the academic contingent, with scholarly formats (e.g. paper sessions) and voices that were seen to be, by some, as disconnected from abolitionist struggles on the ground. Claire Culhane, a stalwart Canadian prisoner advocate and abolitionist (Culhane, 1979; 1985; 1991) expressed the critique that ICOPA was not useful to her work on the ground in jails, prisons and penitentiaries across Canada. She held the opinion that prisoners' voices were obscured (July 11).

58   Organizers of ICOPA III heeded the criticism about the academic contingent overshadowing the voices of prisoners. At the 1987 Montreal conference there was a significant involvement of activists and prisoners. It is through these

efforts that a series of panels featuring papers written and presented by (ex-)prisoners was organized, which formed the first issue of the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (Piché, Larsen, 2010). The thrust of the JPP was founded on the notion that:

> … if the prison abolitionist argument that the goal and necessity of the outside critic should be to empower the disenfranchised, then providing the opportunity for prisoners to state their case, to identify the major problems, and to provide us with up to date information and analysis about what is actually occurring in our prisons is a necessity. (jpp.org/History)

59   ICOPA III also had a greater number of presentations on and by Indigenous peoples and their struggles with imprisonment, including those by the late Indigenous activist-academic and lawyer, Patricia Monture, Mylène Jaccoud, an academic, and the Leonard Peltier Defence Committee (ICOPA III Presentation abstracts).

3.3. ICOPA 15 and Power Dynamics in the Academic-Survivor-Activist Triune

60   Among the key informants of this study, one person mentioned that those who have more say are those with resources and by and large, they tend to emanate from the academy and so dispose of access to funds, space, equipment, tools and time to think, plan, write and organize (June 14a). In the power-with category of influence, as Routledge (2009) reminds us, not all participants play on an equal footing depending on their academic, ex-prisoner and/or survivor, or activist identity. This key informant said:

> The difficulty is that usually the pragmatic issues outweigh the content. I would love to organize a conference but I don't have a university and I don't have money… So that makes it very hard for me to do that…it cannot have the same caliber as an ICOPA because I don't have the students because I am not, in that sense, in academia. So I think the pragmatic access you have to funds, and to space, and to contexts, and to people supporting you like a support system, that often will be more decisive on how ICOPA is organized than the ideas you have or who you want there (June 14a).

61   The organizing committee of ICOPA 15 made outreach efforts toward groups with a preponderance of people of colour and those with lived experience (survivors) in an effort to try to bring them into the ICOPA fold. One comrade in particular recognized these efforts, and focused on the overlap of the different areas of internal struggle, namely the triune and the racism issues (see July 7 interview, above, section 3.2.3). Another also acknowledged that the ICOPA 15 organizing committee had made efforts to ensure the presence of those with lived experience (see June 25 interview, above, section 3.2.3). In an effort to engage non-academics, the call for contributions was not limited to papers, but included film, poetry, theatre and other types of presentations.

62   Other activists have voiced criticism that the tenor of panel sessions is too "academic" and it can be difficult for non-academics to feel at home in these surroundings:

> …it is a radical criminology conference, and I don't do radical criminology. My organization doesn't do radical criminology, so whether or not it's an appropriate space for organizers…I think, is still up in the air (June 25).

63   In addition, some activists claim there is not enough emphasis on strategy and action at ICOPA conferences (June 25). Yet, for the most part, academics[17] in ICOPA are acutely aware of the need to keep survivors of state repression and social harm at the heart of ICOPA, and build conference programs that reflect a diversity of voices from people of colour, indigenous populations, the queer and trans community, and those contending with disability. In this respect, the JPP is seen as an important player:

> I think that generally, the people who work on the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons have ensured it is a pivotal spot for ensuring that imprisoned peoples' participation is circulating through ICOPA on some kind of regular basis (June 25).

64   This remains an issue of concern, however. While many scholars consider themselves activist-academics in that they are connected to real struggles on the ground, there is the perception that a chasm exists between scholars who benefit from institutional resources and activist struggles on the ground. In this respect, those in ICOPA who identify as academics are motivated to nurture relationships with a range of organizations in struggle, to keep their ear to the ground, and increase the potential for a plurality of voices to be heard within ICOPA. Academics and academic-activists can often contribute both zero-sum and non-zero-sum resources (Gordon, 2005) to foster and amplify the voices of survivors of state repression or social harm. In particular, academics can add to the narratives of activist struggles in a way that can, at times, reach a broader public. It should be noted that not all scholars possess such institutional resources. For instance, graduate students and part-time professors certainly do not benefit from the same access to university resources as tenured or tenure-track faculty. In addition, one should not always draw rigid lines between those who identify as academics, and survivors of state repression or social harm.

3.4. Broader Consideration on Power Dynamics

65   Routledge (2009) reminds us that ethics in political activism involves honesty, truth and personal acknowledgement (88). He also considers it critical to be self-conscious, to [understand] one's past and one's present, desires, fears and needs", and "one's relationship to the larger world (ibid.). It is thus incumbent upon social justice activists to address power differentials in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and so forth; we need to undertake a process of decolonizing one's self if we are to engage in meaningful struggle (ibid.). Facilitating a conversation and creating the right space for such potentially transformative work is a challenge taken up by other groups engaged in resistance against state practices. To ensure struggles represent the voices of those repressed and marginalized, those at the receiving end of such injustice must be front-and-centre in deliberations around struggle. Walia (2013) reminds us that:

> Those who have historically been denied any voice or control over issues that impact their lives are the experts in articulating the impacts of injustice, and carry the necessary awareness of how to effectively organize against power (197).

4) Leadership, Deliberative Vitality and Decision-Making

66   One of the questions that guided this research project was: "Who leads ICOPA?" Composed of people who are engaged in struggle against domination and oppression, ICOPA is also an entity with no formal committees or councils, no elections for positions on governing bodies, and no representative mandate holders. We look at leadership and decision-making in this entity with an attention to hierarchies of decision-making, both at the international and at the local levels. While an in-depth discussion of leadership is beyond the scope of this article, we focus on anti-authoritarian leadership as it best stands to inform processes of deliberation within ICOPA.

4.1. Theoretical Considerations

67   The concept of leadership is one that has mobilized generations of scholars, and is considered by some as the quintessential element of organizations, without which progress cannot be achieved. Others believe that the very category "leadership" is problematic as it reifies hierarchy and individualism. There are many ways to view leadership, for instance,

> In communal transformation, leadership is about intention, convening, valuing relatedness, and presenting choices. It is not a personality characteristic or a matter of style, and therefore it requires nothing more than what all of us already have (Block, 2008, 85).

68   About leadership, Routlege (2009) says it is relational ethics that help us to be aware of the internal hierarchies, the silencing of dissent, or how the internalized hegemonic power conceptualizations work and serve to keep us vigilant in the face of 'minor' reversals within resistance practices (90).

69   Walia (2013) considers that leadership in many NGOs is based on principles of democratic centralism, based on Leninist tendencies (196). The typical functioning of such a structure is that it relies on a strong core leadership to make decisions that members are expected to execute (ibid.). She says that centralization and a top-down structure is alienating (ibid.). In contrast, she notes that antiauthoritarian leadership is mindful of the differential impact of systemic marginalization and:

> Instead of seeking to equalize across diverse lived experiences, the opinions of those most impacted are prioritized as an inherent form of leadership. This form of leadership integrates an anti-oppression analysis, and as such, is an inversion: it strives to encourage rather than discourage or deny leadership. (Walia, 2013, 197, emphasis in the original)

70   Such an approach is useful for addressing decision-making within ICOPA. While for some, the characterization of ICOPA as an anarchist entity may be debatable, we are reminded by Walby (2011) that the promise of anarcho-abolition is to identify perversions of power and subvert them through self-governing, anti-authoritarian, non-hierarchical relations (295). While not all ICOPA participants are aligned along anarchist principles, such consideration may enable

us, as abolitionists, to confront the many ways we internalize punishment as a framework, as well as to come to an understanding of our resistance to confront the limits of our own conceptualizations of equality, privilege, and oppression.

4.2. Historical Markers

71   The first ICOPA established not only an international steering committee, but a newsletter as well, although it does not seem to be explained what mechanism was put in place to either elect or rotate membership on the committee, or guide the newsletter. The brainchild of Ruth Morris and Louk Hulsman, ICOPA was steered for many years by these two stalwart abolitionists, along with others. In the early days, they would travel to the location of the next ICOPA and offer guidance and help to the local organizers (July 11). In recent years and with the deaths of some past ICOPA elders, it has become unclear who was on this committee or even whether it was still in existence.

72   In an entity such as ICOPA that has little in the way of formal governance structure, questions of leadership and power are central. It is acknowledged that whomsoever decides to get involved in ICOPA, by not only attending a conference, but by engaging in off-conference email conversations, initiating conversations on particular issues, publishing work on abolition, or volunteering to host a conference, co-leads ICOPA. Yet, there are those who think that some people "have more listening" than others, meaning that they have people's attention or esteem (July 2b). In a fuzzy way, it is often assumed that those who guide ICOPA are those we refer to as "elders", mostly founding or longstanding members like Ruth Morris and Louk Hulsman (both now deceased), Thomas Mathiesen, Bob Gaucher, and Hal Pepinsky (June 25, 27, July 11a, 14a). The fact that a more recent generation of ICOPA comrades may be at the helm seems to be lost on some, especially the very individuals who seem to be emerging as influencers.

4.3. ICOPA 15 and Leadership, Deliberative Vitality and Decision-Making

73   The staging of ICOPA 15 on Algonquin Territory had the advantage of bringing together many people who were former students of Bob Gaucher. Bob, a participant of ICOPA since its founding, is responsible for making abolitionism a compulsory course in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa (Quirion, 2014). As a result, there are a few generations of criminology students who have been influenced not only by Bob's analysis of the penal system, but by learning about penal abolition. Some of his former students have moved away to ply their organizational and analytical skills around abolition in different settings. Some have become members of the academy in Ottawa and elsewhere, while others have remained activists and prisoner advocates in Canada.

74   ICOPA 15 was less than a year away by September 2013 and the organizing committee was recruited. In the first instance, Justin Piché invited Kim Pate (a past ICOPA participant) and the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies to co-sponsor ICOPA. Invitations to organize were sent to students, No One Is Illegal (NOII), the Odawa Native Friendship Centre, the Ontario Public Interest Group (OPIRG) Carleton, OPIRG Ottawa, the Criminalization

and Punishment Education Project (CPEP), Prisoner Justice Day organizers and various community activists. Initial participants included undergraduate and graduate students, professors from the English and the French sides of the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, and community activists. After a couple of meetings, some lost interest, or for other reasons did not participate. The remainder of the group comprised around 15 people, and between 10 and 12 attended regularly.

75   The organizing committee was made up of 10 women and five men. Five members were activists; to our knowledge, two were either former prisoners or a family member of a still-criminalized person; there were two professors, and eight graduate and undergraduate students. Three people were French-Canadians, two were of Asian heritage, at least three were born outside Canada (US, Argentina and Romania), and two self-identify as queer. Of the academics on the committee, at least four consider themselves activist-academics. Some of these are members of the Criminalization and Punishment Education Project (CPEP), a group that organizes campaigns, most notably on the catastrophic situation in Canada's jails, prisons and penitentiaries. A representative from the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies also made a sporadic presence, until she withdrew from the committee over a dispute as to the content of a panel on sex work, which criticized the prohibitionist position of CAEFS and Kim Pate that supports the criminalization of clients and third parties. Three committee members had previous ICOPA experience. Many of the students had taken the abolition course required for the undergraduate degree in criminology at the University of Ottawa and were familiar with the subject, if not with ICOPA. For four members of the group, working on ICOPA was actually part of their paid or scholarly duties (one as a professor, one as a research assistant, and two as placement students for the JPP).

76   For our purposes, two things happened at ICOPA 13 in Belfast that affected the local organizers of ICOPA 15. Consideration was given to moving the ICOPA conference to either Canada or to Trinidad & Tobago, where Catherine Ali wanted to host ICOPA 14. Some of the participants at the closing plenary were uncomfortable with the idea, because they suspected that it would be too reformist in outlook. Some also criticized the missionary or savior zeal perceived in choosing such sites as the Caribbean. At the same time, Catherine spoke adamantly of the merit of having it in her jurisdiction because of the fantastic opportunity that having an open-minded Director of Prisons at the time could mean for advancing progress in alternatives to criminalization, as well as how an abolition conference would be a terrific and timely occurrence in order to propel the reform movement there toward abolition. Claire Delisle and Justin Piché (both graduate students at the time), and the only Canadians present at the closing plenary, were interested but reticent about the timing of trying to organize ICOPA 14 in Canada (the alternative suggestion) while still being in the finishing throes of PhD dissertation writing and ensuing defenses, and because neither had institutional affiliation as professors at the time. A compromise was struck and Catherine was tasked with producing a detailed proposal in the six months following Belfast, failing which, the conference would go to Canada. Catherine came through and the conference headed to Trinidad & Tobago with the understanding that ICOPA 15 would be held in Canada.

77   In the same closing plenary, a conversation took place on the viability of creating a website for ICOPA. J. Piché and C. Delisle were tasked with its development. Piché did the bulk of this work and since that time, has been actively developing the website and trying to "keep the conversation going" in between ICOPAs via the email list that includes the addresses of most past ICOPA attendees. Since ICOPA 14, he has "attempted to do a renewal exercise" and sent newsletters via email to the ICOPA group in the hopes of keeping a conversation alive. Unfortunately, the broad email

list was not a productive place for such conversations (July 18).

78   Traditionally, closing plenaries are an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on the current conference; to select the site of the subsequent ICOPA; and to pass resolutions including direction on moving forward, or to reiterate support for issues presented by participants. On using the closing plenary as a space to debrief about the conference, one key informant said:

> I think doing some assessment together at the end about how it went is really important and I really value that and I really encourage people to keep that: that we all just sit in the room together and talk to each other about how it was, you know, and give feedback to the planners, and input to people who might take up whatever's next (June 25).

79   However, the same person did not consider the closing plenary as an appropriate venue to conduct business, opening up the possibility for striking a steering committee tasked with mandates such as choosing the next site for ICOPA:

> I think the business aspects of it should not happen there. And I think the closing plenary could be a place where that body could solicit input, and then be empowered to make some decisions. Because I think a lot of people who come to the conference don't necessarily…it might be their first engagement with ICOPA; they might not have a long-term investment in it, and there they are, in the middle of old conversations, and decisions and may think "I don't know how the hell to assess this" or, "I don't care". So I think if somebody existed, that could do some of that business, then a report on the business of ICOPA could also open the conference, it could be like, "ok, 16 is going to be in this place and here's the process by which we came to that and we want to get you excited to go there, right now; and here's who you can talk to if you have concerns about how that happened or give input." Or, "this is how much, or the kind of nature and quantity of resources that are available to ICOPA right now. If you want to help us increase that, here are the people to talk to", but to have some way of providing a good context for what does exist inside of ICOPA without compelling whoever shows up in that room to be the people doing that business. Where everybody who just goes to a conference just gets added to an email chain, or whatever the case might be (June 25).

80   Other key informants were quite happy to carry on as we have been. That the closing plenary gets long or gets messy was not seen to detract from this more consensus-based model (July 7, July 11). This raises a question as to the desirability of establishing a steering committee (once again) in order to have a mandated group tasked with some of the decisions to be taken at ICOPA, including the question of site selection and fundraising, as part of our preoccupation with maintaining and growing a robust international abolition movement or whether the current model serves ICOPA's interests. The agenda of closing plenaries is full: site selection, adopting resolutions, and evaluating the current conference. The nature of deliberative communication in ICOPA is based on a consensus model, meaning that areas of disagreement can take a long time before being resolved.

81   As noted previously, despite the manifestation of significant interest from various participants to host future conferences, the site for the next conference was left in limbo. Thus, ICOPA 15 ended without having selected a site for the following conference, even though a proposal had been submitted prior to the plenary, albeit asking for a three-year gap until the next iteration. Meanwhile two participants had expressed an interest in staging ICOPA 16 in Turkey in 2016, but neither of them were present at the plenary and no solid proposal had been submitted. There was also a firm proposal for ICOPA 17 to be held in the United Kingdom. A lengthy discussion ensued about where to stage next ICOPA

and about race oppression and privilege in ICOPA (See section 3.2.3).

82   The closing plenary adjourned with the understanding that some time would be afforded the individuals who had showed an interest in organizing the next ICOPA but who had not submitted a proposal. It was an unusual ending to the conference. On both sides of the race and privilege issue, people left feeling out of sorts. Those who are concerned with the lack of race diversity expressed frustration at the perceived resistance of ICOPA participants to take on the issue; conversely, others were taken aback by the way in which it was addressed and were frustrated that they had been put on the spot for the lack of race diversity. Moreover, seasoned ICOPA participants who were part of the ICOPA 15 organizing committee were familiar with the tenor of closing plenaries, but had not briefed other organizers about the nature of the closing plenary, which created feelings of surprise and dismay within the organizing group.

83   ICOPA 15 organizers, who tasked themselves with steering the process to select the sites for future conferences, tabled a proposal to past ICOPA participants to hold the events on a yearly basis for a trial period of three years beginning in 2016. First, we received two proposals for ICOPA 16, one from Ecuador and the other from Turkey. The Ecuadorian proposal was chosen. Second, because there was a sound and full-fledged proposal to hold ICOPA in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, United States ICOPA 17 will be held there. Third, a proposal to hold an ICOPA was submitted by an English contingent, to coincide with the marking of 50 years of abolitionism in Europe. ICOPA 18 will thus head to Liverpool, England in 2018.

84   The question remains whether to keep the status quo in terms of how business is conducted at ICOPA, or to strike (yet again), a steering committee to take care of site selection and other issues such as funding, thereby freeing up the closing plenary for taking up resolutions and providing feedback on the conference. ICOPA could address this by reserving some space on the formal agenda for guiding issues about ICOPA at future conferences, conversations about deliberative vitality and the best way forward can be purposefully taken up within a panel or a mini-stream devoted exclusively to ICOPA.

4.4. Broader Considerations on Leadership, Deliberative Vitality and Decision-Making

85   In most struggles, activists are preoccupied with democracy, and the desire to ensure that people are considered and have a voice in making decisions. They are concerned with justice, fairness, and well-being in the wider world. But what about within their own organizations and groups? If activists are not mindful of how decisions are made, they can easily slip into the "tyranny of the majority". Prefiguring group practices, the exercise of praxis, stands to be a viable way to make democracy come alive. Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972) argued that a politics of liberation is based on knowledge sharing in order to work together toward liberation. Granting and accepting mandates among a group can lead to power being vested in a small clique, precluding group members from actively engaging in deliberative vitality out of internalized deference, fear, or misplaced regard for expert voices. About making democracy, Holst (2014, 80-81) asserts: *We make democracy when we take popular, deliberative, democratic control over the decisions that affect our lives… Democracy is a struggle that is never finished.*

86   It is incumbent upon all activists to be mindful of the place taken up in discussions and debates by others and to

guard against a monopoly of direction emanating from a few endowed with skills of persuasion and influence. A key part of this is striving to ensure that adequate space with a conducive environment for participation is provided in gatherings that promotes deliberative vitality rather than shuts it down.

Conclusion

87   This article has highlighted four on-going areas of concern and tension within the International Conference on Penal Abolition. This provides a platform for further discussion of these issues within the entity, by focusing on past and current trends of contention and consensus on each topic, and by offering some guiding theoretical considerations to anchor future deliberations. It also draws connections between ICOPA priorities, and those of other groups in struggle, including some who participate in ICOPA conferences.

88   In terms of the opposition between abolition and reform, Mathiesen's (2015, 1974) The Unfinished had stood the test of time and continues to serve as a guiding reference for abolitionists' allyship with reformers. His explication of the use of non-reformist reform (2015, 231-232) can help abolitionists to strategize and ally with reformers for the purposes of diminishing harm without entrenching the system (ibid.; for a cautionary tale on allyship with reformers, see McCann, 2013). Along with Sudbury's (2009) example of the work done by Critical Resistance abolitionists to close down some prisons in California, this shows the promise of abolitionist allyship with others, so long as discursive strategies are put in place in order to validate and extend abolition principles. In addition, such discursive strategies stand to guard against the erosion of abolition principles as we engage with reformers either on the ground or at ICOPA.

89   The race-privilege dimension is grounded in the reality that punishment is disproportionately meted out on people who bear the brunt of race oppression. Agozino's (2003) treatment of imperialism makes the point that the police, the courts and corrections are all nefarious fabrications of imperialist domination. Using a framework of colonialist domination reaffirms that most forms of race oppression are direct results of the egregious historical realities associated with imperialism and colonialist domination the world over. In light of this, whether we are considering Indigenous, Black and other people of colour, or migration issues related to displacement, all result from the same basic matrix. At the same time, focusing on these oppressions must go hand in hand with a recognition of positionality on the part of those with privilege, as Cannon (2012) and hooks (1988) point out.

90   This issue will remain part of the discussion as long as those who bear the brunt of race oppression do not feel the organization in which they participate reflects their viewpoint and position, which would seriously devalue ICOPA. One way to change this is to create an environment in which oppressed people's voices have a prominent place in the entity, and to avoid tokenism. We are reminded by Walia (2013) that our work must be based on oppressed people's own analysis and experiences (191). Creating an environment where oppressed communities give direction to the ICOPA deliberations without feeling marginalized, and anchoring abolitionist analysis more systematically in a colonialist domination framework stands to create more positive and alternative relationships among various groups.

91   While the power dynamics in the academic-survivor-activist triune receives consideration on the part of ICOPA organizers, comments about the discomfort of academic settings for the conference for some, and the prominence of

academics in the organizing of conferences signals the need for attention to be given to what Routledge (2009) calls relational ethics and changing some of the ways conference organizing is undertaken to ensure more engagement on the part of survivors and activists. This can be done by sharing non zero-sum resources (Gordon, 2005) more meaningfully and for academics to relinquish their role as experts in a more sustained fashion to give space for the expertise of lived and activist experience. Like the issue of race oppression, addressing academic privilege is a first step in reconfiguring power dynamics in this group, and sending a clearer message about the necessity of lived and activist experience being at the center of ICOPA organizing.

92   Leadership and deliberative vitality in ICOPA requires participants to be aware of the internal hierarchies (Routledge, 2009, 90) that can exist in the organization based on a number of factors, including academic and race privilege. Sometimes the silence of some participants is not agreement, but dissent. Not hearing dissent in our deliberations thwarts our democratic practice and the desire for relational honesty and integrity. Vibrancy in ICOPA is dependent on a heightened awareness of these issues and the relative certainty that controversial issues are raised and openly considered.

93   As for whether ICOPA should have a steering committee, this issue should be considered in light of Walia's (2013) caution about having a strong core leadership to make decisions can take away from deliberative vitality, leaving participants feeling alienated from decision-making. She contrasts this with antiauthoritairan leadership, which can avoid such pitfalls by integrating anti-oppression analysis and by encouraging leadership from those with lived experience.

94   Internal struggles notwithstanding, ICOPA is at a crossroads where it has the possibility not only of shifting the conversation, but of better positioning itself at the center of the debates on punishment and control. As one stalwart ICOPA comrade states:

> ...we really have to try to generate more visibility than we've had. Because there's a lot of people out there that are unhappy, that don't see this shit working very well. So making them aware of us and this ability to come together I think is very important (July 11).

95   We call on fellow ICOPA abolitionists and newcomers to examine collectively some of the customs and traditions that characterize the entity in terms not only of leadership and decision-making, but also in terms of ways to ensure that its resistance and analysis are fundamentally allied with oppressed groups who are the predominant targets of state repression; that the voices of activists, former prisoners, and survivors of state and social harm be central to the conference agenda; and that a robust discussion continue on the most promising ways of engaging with reformers. As mentioned earlier, building a space (panel or mini-stream) into the conference program, devoted to collective reflection on ICOPA itself as a penal abolitionist entity, stands to make ICOPA participants more conscious of our collective goals and processes, and stands to give a greater sense of ownership of these and other issues.

96   In addition, we suggest that ICOPA integrate anti-oppression workshops as part of the program, a space to consider privilege and oppression in an open and supportive format. This would not only engage participants in thinking about race oppression and privilege, but also consider patriarchy, (cis)heteronormativity, ableism and other forms of oppression. Further, a concerted effort is needed to provide space for ICOPA participants to process feelings about these

topics, and have specific supports set up to assist those who are triggered by participants' words (either within panels or in social interaction), or the material being presented. Another area that merits work is to address English-speaking privilege. ICOPA 15, although staged on a bilingual campus, and having French-speakers on the organizing committee, lacked bilingual panels and written material that may have encouraged more participation. ICOPA 16 in Quito, Ecuador will take place predominantly in Spanish, but stands to be a better example of how to provide translation and resources to participants who speak other languages.

97   Penal abolitionism is, more than ever, apposite to current debates on penality and penal regimes. It is crucial that penal and other abolitionists work together toward increasing our potential by allying with other social justice networks and groups to maximize our efforts at dismantling systems of control, caging and madness-making. Abolitionists continue to stand firm against, and resist calls for, ready-made answers about a new replacement for the old model, while continuing to dispel facile myths about abolition (such as opening all jail and prison doors now), and provide considered responses to questions about danger. Multiplying occasions to engage with others on campaigns that benefit from broad-based alliances, and conceptualizing abolition in terms to which others may be responsive (i.e. the decriminalization of drugs and sex work, the eradication of poverty, and migrant justice, all of which are abolitions), continues to be sound practiceThe current neoliberal stranglehold and the consequent victimization it fuels provides ample opportunity to deconstruct the moral economy of personhood (Skeggs, 2004) in which some people are good and deserving of love and respect, while others are bad and deserving of retribution. In its place, by ongoing listening to and caring for ourselves and others, by our commitment to collective praxis, we not only resist injustice writ large, but stand to create more gentle and solidary community-driven responses to social conflicts. This is done by creating more disturbance, on the streets, in policy-making, in the media and in academic circles to upset the penal status quo.

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Notes

1 While the only international group of its type, one should note that its breadth is limited. In many areas in the world there is no awareness of its existence despite participants coming from many countries.

2 ICOPA used roman numerals for their conference until the end of ICOPA XII when a resolution was taken at the closing plenary to adopt arabic numbers. This text uses roman numerals for ICOPA editions until ICOPA 13, when it adopted arabic numbers. The aim of this change was to make it clearer for all to understand.

3 We understand "organizing" to encompass social dynamics within the group, including notions of leadership and power.

4 "Retributive justice" is based on the idea that an unjust occurrence (social harm) can be made just by punishing the person deemed responsible for incurring the harm. "Transformative justice" on the other hand, refers to overcoming an unjust situation by enabling relationships to develop meaningfully among those who harm, those harmed, and their communities, by seeing future possibilities and by taking into account a broader understanding of distributive injustice (see Morris, 2000b).

5 International comrades include some Canadians who have extensive ICOPA experience.

6 Critical Resistance (criticalresistance.org) is a US-based abolitionist organization.

7 We note that the appellation "America" is problematic, as it encompasses more than the United States.

8 Key informants remain anonymous. We have thus elected to represent each key informant interview by the date in which it took place.

9 Other reasons include the fear of travelling over US airspace, especially since US Homeland Security is empowered to have planes land if they discover that a "suspicious" passenger on board. Some people with criminal records are fearful of being detained in the US.

10 No One Is Illegal "is a migrant justice movement rooted in anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, ecological justice, indigenous self-determination, anti-occupation, and & anti-oppressive politics. We are part of a worldwide movement of resistance that strives and struggles for the freedom to stay, the freedom to move, and the freedom to return" (No One Is Illegal – Toronto [http://toronto.nooneisillegal.org/demands]).

11 Informal conversations with ICOPA participants.

12 Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do. Access to privilege doesn't determine one's outcomes, but it is definitely an asset that makes it more likely that whatever talent, ability, and aspirations a person with privilege has will result in something

positive   for   them.   Peggy   McIntosh   at   The   White   Privilege   Conference–
[http://www.whiteprivilegeconference.com/white_privilege.html].

13 Activists and academics can also be survivors of state or social harm.

14 An exploration of more traditional left and/or Marxist models is beyond the scope of this article.

15 This is reminiscent of Mathiesen's (2015, 47-61) "the unfinished", wherein he says that alternatives should remain a sketch.

16 We take note of the fact that the term "inclusive" is problematic (see section 3.2.2, paragraph 5).

17 Many academic participants in ICOPA are academic-activists.

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