

SEPTEMBER 2014 ACTIONICOPA.ORG UPDATE

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RESISTING CARCERAL NATION STATES: THE FIFTEENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PENAL ABOLITION (ICOPA 15)

JUNE 13 - 15, 2014

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA
ALGONQUIN TERRITORY / OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA

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BUILDING AWARENESS, DEVELOPING STRATEGY, TAKING ACTION

JPP SESSIONS AT ICOPA 15

Dear *JPP* session panelists,

Thank you for sharing your experiences and analyses of the socio-politics of incarceration with ICOPA 15 delegates. The conference was attended by hundreds of abolitionists from across Canada and around the world. The *JPP* sessions were well attended, often attracting several dozen participants.

This newsletter provides a summary of what took place during each of the panels. Enclosed in your packages you will also find comment sheets filled-out by some of the folks who attended the sessions where your paper was read. A special issue of the *JPP* (Volume 23, Number 2) featuring selected contributions from ICOPA 15 will be available. We hope that you found the comments from the reviewers, which were intended to assist with the further development of your pieces, to be constructive and useful if working them up towards publication. We are always willing and eager to facilitate the development of first-hand accounts of criminalization and punishment, and are open to receiving feedback to improve our approach.

In the months ahead, a report summarizing all that took place at ICOPA 15 and concrete actions that will flow from this meeting will be produced and circulated to all participants. In closing, we would like to again thank you for your contributions to the conference and for adding your voices to the fight against state repression.

Sincerely,

Ashley Chen, Sarah Fiander and Justin Piché
Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (JPP)

EXPERIENCES OF CRIMINALIZED AND INCARCERATED WOMEN (JUNE 13, 2014)

This panel in particular focused on gender, and the ways in which gender performance, as well as gender expectations, currently inform penal policy, as well as women's experiences of criminalization and incarceration.

- "Re-bonding Ties as a Successful Re-entry Tool" was read by the author, Yraida Guanipa, through webcam via Skype. Yraida's piece explored the struggles she faced with maintaining relationships with her family, especially her children, while incarcerated.
- "Top Freedom, Criminalization, Incarceration and Isolation" was read by author Jeannette Toussounian. Jeannette's presentation delved into how authorities enact policies and practices aimed at controlling the female body, drawing on her experience of incarceration as a criminalized woman.
- "The Gender of Crime in the US: A Feminist Diatribe on the Police and Prosecution Promoting Male Violence Against Women" by Cathy Marston highlighted the issue of the criminalization of femininity in a patriarchal world, drawing on feminist theorists bell hooks, Jennifer Kilty and Sylvie Frigon.
- "Patriarchy, Misogyny and Sexism: A Dialectical Analysis" by Jennifer Gann highlighted misogynistic forms of violence found in a culture that uses criminal prosecution to oppress women.

The period following the presentation of these papers allowed the authors who were able to attend this panel to answer questions from audience members. Yraida discussed her ongoing difficulties of re-building personal relationships due to the stigma attached with incarceration following her release. Jeannette led a conversation about her efforts to improve prisoners' rights through her art and writing, and the difficulties of corresponding with state authorities on conditions of imprisonment.

IMPRISONMENT AND THE CANADIAN CARCERAL STATE (JUNE 13, 2014)

This panel focused on the experiences of prisoners incarcerated in Canada.

- "Business as Usual", written by Jarrod Shook, examined the experiences of death inside and outside of Canadian federal penitentiaries.
- "The Truth About Provincial Prisons" by Jose Vivar discussed what it is like to be held in a Canadian provincial prison while awaiting trial.
- "International Prison Transfers" was written by Stefan Crisbasan and explored the difficulty of being granted transfer to one's home country while incarcerated in the United States.
- "Daisy's Rehabilitation" by Peter Collins featured an audio-visual presentation about the experiences of many prisoners who are marginalized in society by the Canadian carceral state.
- "The Person I Am Now" by Neil Shah explored his own experience with the Restorative Justice model in Canada.

In addition to these papers, we also had the privilege of having Neal Freeland – an Indigenous artist, social service worker and former prisoner – facilitate the discussion period. He engaged with the writings from the authors of this panel and touched upon his own experiences to discuss the issues with the current penal system. Panel participants noted the continuing trend of the current Canadian carceral state towards increasingly punitive measures in dealing with conflict and harm. The consequences of this trend that were highlighted by participants included the difficulties in maintaining strong relationships between prisoners and their families, less chances of success for re-entry due to harsher release conditions, and the implications stemming from the state's problematic definition and application of "rehabilitation".

THE VIOLENCE OF INCARCERATION (JUNE 13, 2014)

This panel concentrated on prisoners' experiences of physical and psychological violence within carceral institutions.

- "The Child is Prey" by Jerry Lashuay discussed the author's personal experience of coping with sexual violence as a youth in an adult prison.
- "Prison Living is Not So Easy", written by Victor Becerra, focused on the daily difficulties of imprisonment, including potential conflicts between other prisoners due to limited space and access to resources.
- "Poor Living Conditions" focused on author Derrick Tucker's experience of inhumane treatment of prisoners at the hands of prison officers.
- "The Culture of Incarceration", written by Benito Gutierrez, emphasized the implications of the glorification of 'crime' in film and music, and offered early education and prevention as possible solutions to keeping prisons empty.
- "Gratuitous Brutality and a Solution to It" by James Bauhaus detailed his own experience with staff brutality and harassing searches.

The discussion held following these papers was about the skewed representation of imprisonment found in mass media. While the examples of inhumane treatment of prisoners as described in this panel are carceral universals found across most prison sites, panel participants noted the tendency of the mass media to focus solely on incidences of brutal violence between prisoners. Those present also conversed about how the daily struggles of imprisonment tend to be largely ignored by media coverage, which requires action aimed at creating counter-images of criminalization and punishment.

EXPERIENCES AND CRITIQUES OF MASS INCARCERATION IN THE GOLDEN STATE/GULAG (JUNE 15, 2014)

This panel primarily focused on the prison system in the State of California.

- "The Unintended Consequences of Bad Deals" by Kenneth E. Hartman argued that serving life sentence is akin to sentencing the individual to the death penalty.
- "Deterrence, Rehabilitation, and Punishment", written by Harry C. Goodall, examined the failure of California's penal system to meet their own stated objectives that legitimate incarceration.
- Unfortunately, the third piece to be read at this panel, entitled "The Politics of California's Prison Overcrowding" by Forrest Lee Jones, did not arrive in time to be included at the conference, exemplifying the many challenges abolitionists and prisoners face while corresponding between bars.
- "What's in a Name? Depersonalization at the Hands of the State" by Chester Abbotsbury (pseudonym) touched upon the dehumanizing process of mass imprisonment.
- "Formal Request for a Comparative Study of California Prisoners Serving Life Sentences *Without* Parole to Those Serving Life Sentences *With* Parole", written by Dortell Williams, called for stakeholders within the California penal system to research the monetary and social costs and benefits of the state's sentencing laws.
- "The Making of a Phantom Guerrilla and Pseudo Revolutionary" by Kevin D. Sawyer discussed his experience with repression at the hands of the Institution Gang Investigators and Investigative Services within California's Department of Corrections.

This discussion period focused mainly on ways to help improve quality of life for those serving life sentences. Panel participants noted the failure of California's Department of Corrections in providing

adequate programs for prisoners serving longer sentences. Important topics of discussion also included the increasingly depersonalizing experience of imprisonment, such as the use of Skype and webcams in place of face-to-face visits with prisoners' friends and families. Further isolating prisoners behind "technological advancements" also inhibits activists from showing their support for prisoners' rights. Another interesting discussion emerged, when participants compared American and Canadian penal policies, where similarities (e.g. sentence lengths) and differences (e.g. parole opportunities) were noted.

REFORM AND ABOLITION (JUNE 15, 2014)

The final *JPP* session at ICOPA 15 examined the pursuits of penal reform and abolition.

- "Ending the Obscenity of Prisons", written by Tiyo Attalah Salah-El, explored the many social injustices perpetrated and perpetuated by the prison industrial complex.
- "Collaborative Efforts to Achieve Penal Reform" by Jon Marc Taylor outlined strategies to achieve progressive penal reform in the State of Missouri.
- "Proposals for Penal Reform" by Bobby Joe Smith proposed several reforms aimed at making judicial processes more just.
- "Mass Incarceration: The Further Compromise of Public Safety", written by Shawn Fisher, described the costs of mass incarceration to society and explains the potential of Compassionate Release.
- "Delegitimizing the Prison Industrial Complex" by Joe Convict (pseudonym) examined the impact of capitalism in society and urged abolitionists to end complicity of the current system.

The discussion following the readings raised important questions about methods on dismantling the prison industrial complex. Panel participants from different countries agreed that what is needed in order to expose the failures of the current system is for the public to become aware of the struggles and experiences faced by the most marginalized of society: the imprisoned, the uneducated and the poor. Participants also noted that the realities of imprisonment should be emphasized over mediated representations of the system. Arguments were also made towards exposing the practical and economic failures of the current penal system. One issue raised during the discussion period was the difficulty of organizing a prisoners' liberation movement with limited involvement of prisoners due to the nature of penal intervention and censorship.

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To get a copy of the full ICOPA 15 program or other conference related information, please direct all correspondence by email to icopa.canada@gmail.com or by mail to:

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