

Book Review

## Twenty-three accounts of reproductive injustice in Canada: Stories for nurses to know

Book Review of: Martha Paynter, *Abortion to Abolition: Reproductive Health and Justice in Canada*, Fernwood Publishing, 2022, 190 pages; available in eBook and paperback; \$31.99-\$32.00; ISBN: 9781773635149, Illustrated by Julia Hutt

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News in early May 2022 caught the attention of reproductive health advocates everywhere. First a leaked document, then confirmation that in June 2022, the United States Supreme Court would overturn the 1973 landmark decision that once made abortion entirely legal across the United States (the *Roe v. Wade* decision). There is now concern that the concerted efforts and decades-long strategic organizing resulting in this reversal in the US could take shape in similar ways in Canada to reduce substantive access to abortion, or even make abortion in Canada illegal. While abortion has been decriminalized in Canada since 1988 (*R. v. Morgentaler*) and may seem like a permanent decision and one that could never be reverted, scholars and abortion rights advocates are now suggesting, with recent urgency, that it is not enough to rest on past reassurances. Mohini Datta-Ray, Director of Planned Parenthood Toronto, stresses that vigilance is needed to avoid similar outcomes in Canada and urges a need for broad understanding, awareness, and advocacy about abortion access in Canada in order to preserve and, importantly, to strengthen

access and rights to abortion (Metro Morning, 2022). It is in this context and time in history that Dr. Martha Paynter's book, *Abortion to Abolition: Reproductive Health and Justice in Canada*, is written.

It seems important to note upfront that *Abortion to Abolition: Reproductive Health and Justice in Canada* is not exclusively about abortion. Paynter's book brings a central focus on the social structures shaping everyday life and reproductive health and shows how often these systems are in contradiction to sustaining reproductive justice. Paynter, a nurse who has over 20 years experience working in front-line abortion care, and in advocacy work for reproductive health for people in prison since 2012, understands that reproductive justice is not necessarily a simple concept to grasp, and in writing this book, seems to be sharing what she has learned over her 20 years of work in reproductive health spaces.

Leading with more familiar terms in her subtitle, *Reproductive Health and Justice*, provides a

welcome and familiar entree to a more complex discussion of the concept of reproductive justice found within the first few pages. While there is some familiarity to begin the book, we are quickly introduced to concepts that necessitated our careful reading and reflection. For example, Paynter's topics of focus—abortion and abolition—are a juxtaposition of concepts. Reading about reproductive justice alongside prison abolition may provoke many readers—including those of us working in the areas of social justice and equity—as we are introduced to new contexts and complexities to consider. For our part, we are both White, settler, cis-gender nurses with insights informed by our public health backgrounds in reproductive health and sexual health contexts, and we use critical feminist and intersectional lenses in which racialization and other dynamics of social difference are integral to the analysis. We are very much aware that the mainstream reproductive discourse remains centred on reproductive rights, which continue to be solidly equated with the binaries of pro-choice/pro-life debates associated with feminist movements and are almost never linked in public or academic nursing contexts to the carceral care system.

Therefore, Paynter's book is a text that is well-positioned to help scholars and students gain a broad understanding of topics under the umbrella of reproductive health, rights, and justice. It is a book showcasing peoples' connected struggles and activism toward reproductive justice. As Ross and Solinger (2017) explain, unlike the narrower concept of reproductive rights, reproductive justice is defined as the combination of social justice and reproductive rights, which

goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate and has three primary principles: (1) the right not to have a child; (2) the right to have a child; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments. In addition, reproductive justice demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being. (p. 9)

Paynter's stated aim in writing her book is to broaden nursing students' understandings of

reproductive justice in accessible ways. A 10-page introduction aptly titled the same as the book, *Beyond Abortion*, sets the stage nicely by introducing the concept of reproductive justice and abolition. This introductory chapter, densely packed with concepts and history of abortion, reproductive justice, and abolition, in a Canadian context, may be recommended on its own to scholars looking for an overview of the concepts and contexts of reproductive justice and abolition in Canada. The book's main sections are centred around 23 case studies which explain, through stories, how these concepts work together. The case studies are arranged in five main sections, each with 3-5 case studies presented as examples of reproductive injustice, with chapters covering the areas of: bodily autonomy, not having children, having children, parenting in safety, and parenting in prison. Paynter's use of short case studies unravels what would otherwise be hard-to-read legal proceedings, drawing attention to, for example, reproductive injustice facing lesbian parents; the injustice of forced sterilization of Indigenous women; the discrimination inherent in birth alerts, and poor compliance with the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules), among others. In doing so, Paynter brings to the page the humanness integral in writing about people's rich stories of reproductive injustice and demonstrates how reproductive justice matters to nursing and nursing's professional mandate, given nursing is about what matters to everyday individuals and communities. Such clear stories can help us understand how structures and institutions affect the lives of everyday people. Paynter draws on both Indigenous and Black women's theorizing to help illuminate the ways that racism and colonialism are deeply embedded in the neoliberal structures and institutions shaping everyday lives (e.g., environmental racism; carceral systems).

One of Paynter's key arguments is for the abolishment of carceral institutional systems. The case for more-than-reform (i.e., prison abolition) is made and considered essential and connected to the work towards reproductive

justice. The language Paynter uses in her text to refer to the penal system is ‘carceral’, as opposed to ‘correctional’. It is helpful terminology for shifting thinking towards the harms and punishment that remain enduring aspects of such systems. We are provoked by this language, which forces a re-examination and peeling back of the term ‘correctional’, a gut-check against an often neoliberal or post-feminist glossing over of systems that remain harmful to women and people. Through Paynter’s critique of the carceral system and pointing to its harms, we are prompted to consider our own assumptions, for example, of the benevolence of the child welfare system—and how we, as nurses, are implicated in perpetuating the mandates that socialize people into certain ways of being. This prompts us to reflect on how each one of us is implicated, personally and professionally, in these systems. In our attempts to better understand what is meant by abolition, we found that Paynter’s book drew on her earlier co-authored article (Paynter et al., 2022), work that we recommend alongside—or as a precursor to—this book, for a helpful introductory definition and argument for prison abolition (over and above prison reform strategies) and how this relates to nursing ethics.

One of Paynter’s strengths is her inclusion of stories of reproductive injustice that, at first glance, may not seem to have much to do with reproductive health rights at all. The inclusion of such stories serves to strengthen Paynter’s argument about the obscured and often invisible ways in which reproductive injustices take shape and affect people’s lives in ways that may be regularly dismissed or normalized. In this way, the reproductive plights of people who are marginalized, incarcerated, or otherwise hidden are made visible. Readers are guided along through a peeling back of the layers of inequities and injustice, including racism as a central part of many analyses, showing reproductive health consequences. We were drawn towards the stories that we found enriched our understanding

of the social and structural determinants of reproductive health that shape the lives of the people featured. Reading these stories may help nurses begin to see and ask questions about reproductive justice in their patients’ lives. For example, at the time of writing this review, Dawn Walker’s story was making headlines. Dawn Walker is an Indigenous woman who, in August 2022, was charged and arrested for faking her and her son’s deaths and fleeing to the United States; charges that other Indigenous women understand to be related to her attempt to flee domestic violence (Patterson, 2022). By reading the complex reproductive justice stories of people in Paynter’s book, we can begin to see connections and insights into the complexity and tensions ongoing in people’s contemporary lives such as Dawn Walker’s and begin to question the ways that systems decontextualize nurses’ roles and participation as part of such systems.

Discourses about reproductive health, rights, and justice are relevant in how they shape what we know and what we do not know, in working towards supporting our patients, families, and communities. Through Paynter’s work, we are introduced to new discourses and language, such as carceral, abolition, and colonial reprocide. This provocative language helps us see things differently; and, to that end, we would have liked to see these new terms in the index, or perhaps a glossary—to aid with learning and further exemplifying some of these new terms. Nevertheless, this in no way takes away from how Paynter is able to meaningfully describe the interconnections of systems and systemic effects on people’s lives.

*Abortion to Abolition: Reproductive Health and Justice in Canada* is unique in that each case study is accompanied by a beautiful illustration of the person featured in the story, by illustrator Julia Hutt. These illustrations work to make visible the people (women) who often remain invisible – a hiddenness that often pervades even the people whose stories are legally reported, such as these. In featuring stories about human rights legislation, Paynter addresses her point

that many nursing students are not taught these topics in nursing ethics courses. Nearly all the stories featured in Paynter's book are stories that have some legal outcomes, therefore, have been taken up by advocates and are more well-known. Undoubtedly, there is a vast array of other stories that do not have any legal outcomes that deserve telling, and several other volumes of this book could surely be written. These are the stories nurses should listen for and inquire about, as they come to know the telling—stories that bring historicity to the repertoire of nursing—a novel and welcome feature enhancing the limited extent to which history is featured in many nursing undergraduate curriculums. The chapter *Parenting in Safety* features the story of Motherisk, a centre that is maybe best known for its work between 1985- 2019 as a drug safety information centre for women in pregnancy and postpartum. However, Paynter tells a much more contextualized account of the work at Motherisk. In this story, we get a sense of how organizations can work for good but can also operate in ways that further oppress marginalized people. In this way, Paynter's stories offer a departure from case studies beyond just the social, and through Paynter's legal-historical emphases, we are provided stories that help deepen our understanding of the pervasive ways structural and systems-level determinants take shape.

There is a necessity, even urgency, to the book. Given the systematic ways in which matters of injustice are often embedded in policies and practices, such as those aligned with neoliberal dynamics, it is important for nurses to be attuned to these workings. It is perhaps not surprising that an understanding of reproductive justice may not come easy to many nursing students or faculty alike. As nursing remains a profession largely made up of White, cis-gendered, and middle-class women, many may not have had to personally consider matters of reproductive justice (although many will have considered matters of reproductive health). Paynter illustrates how nurses may participate (aware or

not) in maintaining systems of reproductive injustice. Through Paynter's text, we are introduced to reproductive oppression in various, interconnected ways, including reproductive oppression through colonialization, racism, and the prison industrial system.

To our knowledge there is no other Canadian book on reproductive justice exemplifying reproductive health stories in such a way. The book brings together often siloed and compartmentalized areas of nursing specialization, making connections clear (e.g., maternal-child health, sexual health, health in correctional settings, community health). Our assessment is that the book will have much appeal for all scholars and students but may be particularly well-referenced by upper year undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty interested in reproductive health and justice. Indeed, it seems important that this book reach faculty as a priority in order for the insights to be disseminated to students. We discussed how Paynter's book and the case studies within could be a helpful way to teach and illustrate the impacts of, for example, colonialism, racism, and incarceration. The book will surely help scholars in reaching rich analyses of their own. Paynter's book is a welcome addition, adding an accessible, nurse-authored book on the topic of reproductive health and justice in Canada. Paynter's deliberate focus on abolition, not just abortion—beginning with the book's title and expanding from there throughout the book—can help educators, students, and practitioners alike to see the competing and connected narratives, counternarratives and discourses that shape people's reproductive lives, and in tandem, nursing practices that need to be (re)considered.

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