

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Insurgent Love: Abolition and Domestic Homicide*

by Ardath Whynacht (Fernwood, 2021)

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**H**OW DO WE ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF THOSE AT RISK OF DYING FROM domestic violence and the people who cause harm? How do we intervene when someone challenges our safety and survival? How can we create a world that places collective care and compassion at the forefront of safety? Is any of this even possible? *Insurgent Love: Abolition and Domestic Homicide* navigates these complex questions through a deeply compelling and personal exploration of the interwoven relationship between domestic homicide, racial capitalism, and state violence and the possibilities of transformative justice, abolition, and community-based accountability, action, and healing. *Insurgent Love* contributes new and valuable insight into thinking about and working toward a society that prioritizes safe and sustainable strategies to reduce and prevent harm through and within the ongoing resistance and dismantling of the carceral, capitalist, and colonial logics that create and perpetuate such harm in the first place.

Activist, writer, and sociology professor Ardath Whynacht (2021) offers a feminist abolitionist perspective on domestic homicide that challenges and resists carceral feminist approaches to intimate and sexual violence that view policing, prosecution, and punishment as the most effective means of addressing harm. As an alternative framework, Whynacht provides evidence-based arguments supporting abolitionist perspectives that aim to eradicate carceral systems by constructing healing systems that effectively operate to prevent and address harm in our homes and communities. Whynacht contends that in the efforts to transform the conditions that create and perpetuate violence, communities should look to transformative and abolitionist justice as both a model and conceptual framework to guide their social justice work and

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politics. Importantly, these perspectives are humbly presented by Whynacht as she reminds readers that these frameworks and movements belong first and foremost to Indigenous and Black feminists, queer, trans, and two-spirit activists, and disabled and neurodivergent organizers and survivors who have “relentlessly, creatively, and courageously brought movements for prison abolition and transformative justice into existence” (23). Another noteworthy component of *Insurgent Love* is Whynacht’s unique and vulnerable methodological approach to exploring state and family violence. Through analysis of recent cases of homicide in Canada and autoethnographic reflection and detailed field notes from a local murder trial, Whynacht provides a deeply personal glimpse into toxic masculinity’s dangerous and complex workings, the community impacts of violence and intimate partner homicide, and the inevitable tensions involved in doing abolition work.

With the use of case studies, autoethnographic accounts, and theoretical explorations of feminist abolitionist perspectives, Whynacht successfully supports three significant claims throughout the text. First, there is an undeniable relationship between domestic homicide and state and colonial violence. Specifically, the author draws a connection between policing and the ongoing process of colonial violence that draws on the same patterns of coercive control seen in high-risk intimate relationships. Similarly, Whynacht maps the ways logics of colonialism continue to be intertwined with containment, segregation, assimilation, and the elimination of specific populations through carceral practices. For instance, Whynacht notes how the state’s colonial history, as well as the creation of institutions like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to surveil and control Black and Indigenous Peoples have not only contributed to the ongoing carceral and state-sanctioned violence directed at racialized and marginalized populations but also continues to create and maintain systems of power that enable intimate terrorism to exist and persist. As such, Whynacht contends that in both state-sanctioned terrorism and intimate terrorism, violence is strategically utilized to erase survivors’ autonomy and create ongoing fear through different methods of surveillance, physical violence, and other types of coercive control (56). Whynacht delves deeper into the connection between state and family violence by also discussing gender-based police brutality, carceral violence, and the overrepresentation of women in homicide statistics. Thus, Whynacht challenges readers to expand their understanding of domestic homicide and family violence to include the interrelatedness with gendered and colonial state violence and how this relationship manifests in both public and private life.

The second supported claim Whynacht makes is that when the police and carceral state are perpetrators of violence, they cannot also be the solution (57). Given this, sustainable solutions will not manifest through reformatory models, but in “abandonment of our current practices and a courageous reconsideration of what it means to keep each other safe” (58). Calls for transformative justice and abolitionist strategy to address domestic homicide and family violence, among many other things, require us to challenge the concept of caging or exiling and restage the conversation around the common reliance on police and prisons as systems for responding to violence and harm. As such, abolition works toward the eventual closure of prisons, the defunding and dismantling of police, and active efforts to meet the needs of those who cause and who are at risk of causing harm. As Whynacht points out, this framework comes with undeniable tensions and challenges, especially for survivors of harm. Experiencing those tensions herself, Whynacht states that it is not the intention of the book to create a moral hierarchy in which transformative movements for the healing of killers become the ultimate moral goal. Instead, the intention is to provide tools for transformative justice projects that consider all proponents of violence, including perpetrators of harm, state terrorists, and survivors of harm. Furthermore, Whynacht calls for a dual category of intimate partner and family violence that distinguishes “when it is safe to heal together” and when we need alternative strategies for “collective self-defense and protection for survivors and those who are working to intervene” (103). Such processes reinforce the criticality of taking into account different models and impacts of violence, the dangers involved in carceral state practices of crime reduction and confinement, and safe and just forms of intervening that consider the compassion, treatment and needs of all people impacted by ongoing systems of violence.

If we cannot rely on police and prisons to keep us safe, who should we rely on? How can we begin to navigate the fear, the mess, and the complexity of dealing with gender-based violence in our communities and our homes? Here, Whynacht explores the third, and arguably most compelling of her claims—that we can defund the police and dismantle prisons but the carceral state “doesn’t end at the walls of the police station, and it doesn’t always wear a uniform” (113). In the book’s final chapter, Whynacht suggests two concepts that could provide frameworks for the transformation and prevention of the conditions created by racial capitalism, and domestic homicide, all of which depend on varying levels of community accountability aimed at creating forms of safety and justice that are not reliant on

police, prisons, and associated state agencies. The first concept is collective survivorship or the “shared experience of negotiating the impact of losing a loved one to homicide” (120). As Whynacht argues, survivorship, when understood as a collective struggle that involves a commitment to healing and resisting the temptation to let violence “take root permanently within us” (121), provides a sustainable framework for abolitionist justice movements against domestic homicide. The second concept is what Whynacht refers to as insurgent love, or the reshaping of relationships with kin who engage in intimate terrorism. Love, as insurgence, can emerge as a collective practice, as a disruption to coercion, and a way to provide love and compassion to our kin while also setting boundaries that protect ourselves and others (128). Whynacht acknowledges that embracing an abolitionist framework and practicing insurgent love and collective survivorship can be, at times, challenging. In recognition of this, she spends the last chapter offering readers a variety of strategies to help them engage with these frameworks and participate in transformative justice and abolition work.

From understanding different types of abuse, actively engaging in decolonization, supporting youth, rallying for better social services, conducting community-based risk assessment, abolishing harmful systems such as police and prisons, and practicing surrogate kinship, collective survivorship, and insurgent love, the road to healing our kin, our communities, and ourselves is at once filled with opportunity and a never-ending journey of transformation. In discussing existing literature and engaging local and personal case studies and reflection, Whynacht provides a profoundly moving look into domestic homicide and state violence while opening minds to gripping post-carceral imaginings. *Insurgent Love: Abolition and Domestic Homicide* is not only a uniquely informative and empowering piece of literature that works with and for survivors of family violence, but it also proves an equally important resource for activists, allies, scholars, and students committed to abolition, transformative justice, and the creation of safety and refuge within their movements and communities. With the nature of *Insurgent Love*, it seems fitting that we are left to collectively reflect on Whynacht’s final reminder—that love, as insurgence, as a radical act of compassionate resistance, tears down walls, builds safer communities, and “holds space for the renegotiation of what it means to be kin to one another, to share homes, to share our love and lives with each other” (130).