@Risk: Flipping the Property Risk Script with Rinaldo Walcott

[Music]

Jodi: Hey, I'm Jodi Butts. Welcome to @Risk, brought to you by Interac.

Professor Rinaldo Walcott believes there is another side to property risk that is so much more dangerous than the possible loss of chattels. In Rinaldo's view, property isn't subject to risks. It creates risks, acting as a barrier to freedom.

Rinaldo is an associate professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the director of Women and Gender Studies Institute, and the author of *On Property*. In *On Property*, Rinaldo challenges us to imagine an abolitionist future where policing as we know it today doesn't exist and society is animated by shared wealth rather than the private accumulation of capital. He doesn't think more black people in positions of authority is enough to achieve freedom for black people. Rinaldo believes it's necessary to reorganize our society more fundamentally.

Has Rinaldo given up on equality and humanity's better nature? Nope he'll tell you. He is a relentless optimist willing to take the risk of rewriting the source code of our society. And he wants you to join him. Happy black history month.

Thank you for joining me, Rinaldo, and welcome to @Risk.

Rinaldo: Thank you for having me, Jodi.

Jodi: So tell me, what is an abolitionist future?

Rinaldo: So Jodi, an abolitionist future is the desire and the will and the philosophy to remake the world in a fashion and a way where we can once and for all be rid of the kinds of inequalities that have shaped our lives until now.

Jodi: So it's an idea but it's also a practice.

Rinaldo: Yes, it's both an idea and a practice. The practice begins in the context of thinking about what prisons and incarceration, especially what prisons and incarceration has meant for black and Indigenous communities in North America and then throughout the world.

And then it carries true much further into thinking about what would it be necessary for us to do to create a world where prisons and incarceration is no longer needed? And that's where it marks into a set of ideas and a philosophy about how we might be able to live better together collectively.

Jodi: And in your treatise *On Property*, you really zero in on how the concept of property is the root of the problem. What led you to that?

Rinaldo: Well, as I note in the book, I was born in Barbados, lived most of my life in Canada. But Barbados is one of the oldest ex-slave societies in the Americas. And one can't help but haven't been born and spent some significant amount of one's life in a place like that, come to see and to understand how an idea about property, both private and public, shapes how we live with each other.

But also my years of being a university professor and teaching in the area of black studies has given me a keen awareness of how property has shaped social relations across time. Of course black people by and large ended up in the Americas because we were brought to the Americas as property.

So I argue in the book that ultimately black people have a different and a more intimate relationship to property than most other people do because our very bodies were claimed as property by others.

Jodi: And you also talk about how in many ways the plantation is still with us today in our culture.

Rinaldo: Yes, I do. And what I mean by that is that many of the social relations, many of the practices of who is seen as authoritative, who is seen as valued in society, take the kind of imprimatur from the logic of the plantation.

So one of the reasons that we find in North America and even throughout the Caribbean in those punitively black nation states of the Anglo-Caribbean which I know best, is that those people who are the descendants of the enslaved find themselves still living lives of subordination. They find themselves also living lives in which it is assumed that white people have authority over them.

And one of the ways in which this is manifests is true the logic of policing. So we find that when police encounter black people, black people are somehow always suspect. And this is not radically different from when enslaved black people went beyond the master's house or went beyond their master’s plantation. They too were considered suspect. And indeed the idea of carrying a note to say that you could move around began in slavery, which is not very different from in our contemporary culture where a police officer might stop someone and ask to see their ID, ask them to identify where they live, ask them to identify why they're in a particular neighborhood and so on.

Jodi: And when you address what you want to see happen to the police, you're very clear that reform is not enough. Why?

Rinaldo: Well, since the middle of the 20th century, since the 1970s and into our present time there have been many and numerous police reforms. And yet one of the things that we continue to see with all of those reforms is the black and Indigenous people still seem to bear a disproportionate amount of police violence. That the violence that black and Indigenous communities experience is so outsized to the proportion of the population that they occupy. That one can't help but come to

understand that policing is in many ways, not only, but in many ways launched against these communities.

And so what we've seen with police reforms are things like oversight councils. We've seen things like adding Indigenous and black police officers to various police services and forces. And these kinds of reforms, we've seen body-worn cameras. And these kinds of reforms have actually not in any way stemmed the violence that police inflict on black and Indigenous communities. In fact, in some ways it's helped to rationalize that violence.

And by so doing, any sober thinking person can only come to the conclusion that policing is at the root of the violence that keeps some communities subordinated. And the only response to dealing with that subordination is to abolish policing as we know it.

Jodi: Is there a model that- or has another country done this well that that you think Canadians should look to?

Rinaldo: Well, there aren't any countries that have as yet abolished policing totally. But there are countries, the Norwegian countries for example have engaged in forms of policing that have significantly reduced the need for incarceration. They've also engaged in forms of policing that have significantly reduced the need for police violence.

Now having said that, in the Canadian context that even those of us who might not ever find ourselves involved in the kind of conflict that would require the police, we have come to believe that the police is absolutely necessary. So policing has this hold on our imagination that really stops us from thinking about other ways in which we can deal with violence and conflict.

And I would add to this that at the micro levels, in a number of communities people are trying to find ways to work around policing. And in feminist communities, in radical communities, collectivist communities, people have found ways of using various articulations of community accountability to avoid involving policing and police in matters of conflict. And so we're seeing this at a micro- at a micro level. And so people are working towards that kind of future.

Jodi: Reading your book, it reminded me of a moment. I'm a lawyer by training, I went to law school. And I remember sitting in a criminal law class first year and one of my fellow students had a criminology background, that was the focus of his undergraduate studies. And I remember him raising his hand and said, "We're almost finished this class and we've never heard the word rehabilitation yet." And that really struck me.

And I think the other sort of context in which I've thought about prisons and, but as well as policing, is mental health. And there's such a huge treatment opportunity to help people when they are in the prison system and to re-imagine what that experience

could be. That there is a potential that we could actually do some good instead of what happens now, where more people exit the penal system with mental health challenges than those who enter it yes.

Rinaldo: I think that you have pointed to one of the real significant contradictions with policing and the culture of imprisonment that we have. That in fact policing and imprisonment are actually forms of violence. And what we've been doing for a long time is using forms of violence to combat other forms of violence.

And of course, policing over the last 20 or 30 years with the downloading of so many different kinds of social services, the police have become first responders to many more things than simply conflict and crime. And one of those things have been in places like Canada and the US is that the police have become first responders to people dealing with mental health issues.

And because I was writing this book right up to the clock I was able to include in it statistics from 2020, where in out of nine cases across the country that the CBC was able to document where the police were called to intervene with someone suffering from mental health issues, all nine cases resulted in death. To have those kinds of statistics is to say how deadly wrong our vision of what it means to engage with people in distress is.

And so part of what an abolitionist politics does is it asks us that in the context of thinking about the abolition of policing as we presently know it, that we don't simply take those funds and relegate them to some other sphere. But that what we do is we expand the services that are needed for people who need care, who need support. And that we think very differently about what our economy means. So that instead of investing in policing and surveillance, we invest in health care and the kinds of social supports that are needed for people who have mental health issues and other kinds of challenges to live lives of comfort and care.

Jodi: For me personally, one of the most exciting aspects of thinking or rethinking the monies invested in policing is to not only think about how different people could respond to different kinds of incidents. So the best example being having a social worker respond instead of a police officer to a mental health event. But also the opportunity to think more upstream about our investments so that we don't get to a point of an acute incident.

Rinaldo: Most definitely. In cities like Toronto where the police budget takes up a significant amount of the city's budget, we see how problematic… You see how problematic the expenditure on policing is vis-a-vis the kinds of supports that people need in terms of decent pay, decent paying jobs, affordable housing, available green space, and so on.

And what we've seen in a 30, 40, 50 year period is that as investments in policing grow, issues like homelessness, poverty, food insecurity expand. And then policing is asked to deal with those kinds of social problems and social issues. And so an abolitionist philosophy is exactly what you just said, Jodi, it really asks us to think about how we can re-imagine the collective resources that we share both at the level of the city, the province, the nation-state, and globally. To think differently than about what it means to live a life. To live a life that is worth living, a life that might be fulfilling. To live differently as I said, to live differently collectively together. And an abolitionist philosophy really asks us then to think concretely and sustainedly about what we need to do to demonstrate how we care for each other and ways that our lives can be can be deeply fulfilling.

Jodi: I want to talk about some of the personal experiences you shared in the book and how they've informed your view. They're very powerful excerpts in the book where you're willing to share some of your experiences. And one of those relates to the experience of protesting and how that has informed your views about rethinking how we invest in policing.

Rinaldo: Yes. So it was really important for me to give examples of why someone might develop an abolitionist philosophy and abolitionist consciousness and want to engage in work to change not just policing and the culture of imprisonment. But begin to do the kind of work in which a politics of care comes to be the most significant and important lens through which we view living well together. And I really came to understand how policing had transformed when I took to the streets with friends and colleagues to protest the G7 and G20 meetings in Toronto.

As we marched from the east end of Toronto over to the west end and we passed Younge Street and were moving towards the Toronto Police Services Headquarters on College Street. It was my very first time where I experienced what we now come to know is called kettling. And we were surrounded by police dressed in all black, batons, shields, helmets, beaten them in unison and surrounding us basically, kettling us.

And in those moments, one is face to face with what I said earlier about policing being violence. One sees the violence of policing. One experiences it in every in every pore of your body. And you begin to see how it is that policing can't do what we are told is supposed to do, which is to interrupt violence, which is to stop violence. Because policing itself is a form of violence.

Jodi: You also write about riots as something that is different than protest. Can you talk a little bit about the role of a riot and how it might be more effective than protest?

Rinaldo: Yes. One of the things that I wanted to convey in the book around riots is that riots have a history. And especially for black people and people who are descendants of the enslaved, that that history of riots comes from what our ancestors were able to do and achieve on plantations. That our ancestors experiencing what would appear to

be total forms of captivity, total forms of coerced labor did not simply settle into that role of subordination, but they responded and resisted by burning crops, by destroying tools, by threatening the lives of the masters and the overseers and so on.

And by doing that, the bonds of captivity were often adjusted. So we know from the study of slavery and plantation slavery that when the enslaved responded to their captivity, that the masters would sometimes give them a plot of land. Give them time off. Momentarily recognize familial relations and bonds and so on.

And similarly in the contemporary era since the mid 1960s in the US in particular, where we've seen significant forms of black rioting, a black riot is an uprising and it draws from that history of enslavement. It's a way of seasoned attention of the dominating community and forcing them to reckon with the immediacy of the situation.

And because rioting portends the possibility that the very structure of the society might fall apart, that the resistance might do something much bigger than the society is willing to bear at that time. What rioting does is it really pushes at the possibility that the whole society could come apart. And so it provides those in power the opportunity and outlet to respond to the deep dissatisfaction that the riot is evidence of.

And we've seen this since the mid 20th century in the US. We've seen it in the UK, we've seen it in France, and we've seen it to a lesser extent in the Canadian context. But we do have the 1992 riots in Toronto that led to the Stephen Lewis Report and which gripped the then NDP government of Ontario to immediately respond with job training and other kinds of initiatives to help young black people.

And most recently of course we've seen the rioting, the thing that drives this book is the massive global upheaval around the death of George Floyd. We've seen city councils across the US at the state and federal level attempt to respond to questions of policing due to the riots in Minnesota.

So rioting is a particularly important element of black people in particular, a certain, at a particular time, their deep dissatisfaction with the way in which their lives are being shaped by dominant forces. So the right, as Martin Luther King said, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, the riot is the voice of the unheard. And even though as I point out in the book King remained firmly committed to non-violence as his own philosophy for change, embedded in that idea of King is something really important for us to sit with.

Jodi: Now thinking about what you've said about how we can reimagine policing, help us tie this back to notions of poverty, and why even if we were able to completely imagine policing, why that isn't enough.

Rinaldo: So the reason why we're imagining policing is not enough is that I argue in the book that abolitionist- contemporary abolitionist politics begins with policing but it can't end there. And what I'm trying to make the case for is that the first abolitionist movement was for the abolition of transatlantic slavery, and then the abolition of

slavery in plantations and cities in the Americas. And my argument is that that kind of abolition is unfinished. And that the next stage is the abolition of police and the culture of imprisonment.

But ultimately even the abolition of policing and imprisonment would not solve the kinds of intractable problems that continue to plague black and Indigenous lives. And that the way to address those intractable problems is through the abolition of property. And by property I don't only mean property as in land, but I mean all of the various elements that we have now amassed that makes human life possible.

So as in land, as in technology, as in information. All of this, I argue, should be collectively owned. All of this, I argue, should be a part of a renewed commons, one in which we understand that human beings are only just one element of a fully functioning earth and globe.

And if we don't do that, in fact, the continued privatization of property, the continued restrictions on public property are leading to the kind of planetary destruction that is imminent. So my argument is that we need to abolish property if we think we can save human life in the planet. That what we've seen over time is from the time of transatlantic slavery into our present, that the more we privatize property not only the more violent society we become, but also that the privatization of property brings with it a diminishment in the quality of life not just for human beings but for the entire globe.

And so property owned by individuals and fenced off it's not a life-sustaining proposition that we can afford to keep rolling with.

Jodi: Now I think some people would think okay, but if we look to nation states like Russia or China that have ostensibly adopted communist principles, those societies are very violent.

Rinaldo: Absolutely. I think that one of the things that this idea of living well and better together and a renewed engagement with the commons is one that pushes against the idea that what we have seen in China, in Russia, the former Soviet Union, has been the collective will of the people. So I wouldn't hold those particular societies up as actually offering the collective will of the people.

I quote from the African-American geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore in the book. And she says abolition is small c communism without a party. And that's the significant difference, that in both of those examples that you gave me, Jodi, it is not the people who are actually organizing how to live better together. It's the party. And the party in and of itself is an exclusive group. The party in and of itself is equal to our western democratic notion of the small elite who owns the majority of the wealth, who are able to fence off property both as land and as other kinds of material effects as their own.

And so this small c communism without a party is really a philosophical challenge for all of us to figure out how to live and share the proceeds of which human beings are simply a part of on this earth collectively together.

Jodi: Now, some of our listeners might have read *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson's book. And I was asking myself as I was reading your book, might it not be said that property is just one of the tools in the caste toolbox rather than the root of the problem.

Rinaldo: I think that once we come to terms with the profound impact of what it has meant that black people were once property, and how that idea and practice still continues to underwrite our contemporary social relations that Isabelle Winkleson's notion of cast recedes. Because what's at stake is not simply or merely, if as important as is a group of people who are locked into conditions of degradation and material impoverishment. All of that is happening, but something else is also happening. And the something else that's happening is also the way in which the ideas that literally shape our society beyond the material are organizing our lives.

And property is not just simply the land and the resources, but it's this profound idea that really shapes so much of our motivations in contemporary society. We are motivated to think that we're going to be the next ones who have the cherished piece of property. And that plays itself all the way down from imagining that we could be the next Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, to the little tiny cell phone that we might have in our pockets.

So property as an idea is this powerful powerful tool that really keeps a whole lot of us and a whole large part of our society in place. So it's not only about class and caste, it is about the way in which we organize our entire society.

Jodi: I think one of the responses to the Black Lives Matter movement has been a renewed call and a renewed sense of urgency and active steps towards looking at how to improve representation of black and Indigenous peoples in positions of authority. To make more change, so that's not an end unto itself. But the idea that that with greater inclusion and greater representation we can get closer to a society that is more equitable for all peoples who form a part of it. But you don't think that's enough. Do I read that correctly?

Rinaldo: Yes, you're correct. I don't think that's enough. I think that inclusion and representation in a system that is fundamentally built on the perpetuation of inequality doesn't get at the heart of how we might live better together collectively together.

So I work in a university, and I’ve worked in a university for the last 25 years of my life, so about half of my life. And universities are places that the language of representation and inclusion and equity is central to universities and their missions. And university presidents and provosts like to give lovely speeches about these things.

But if you were to look at the university as a microcosm of how equity diversity and inclusion work, you will walk away feeling deeply pessimistic. Because over my 25 years of encountering this kind of language in the university, the university has changed very, very, very little.

But equally as I had said earlier around policing, one of the things these same languages and ideas have been used in policing as well. In the city of Toronto we've had a black police chief. Right now in the city of Ottawa there's a black police chief. And yet what didn't change in either of those cities are the ways in which black people continue to be still harmed by the police.

So what we see then is that equity, inclusion, representation without also changing the structures the on the line, on the pen in ways that that the society is shaped does not do the work that we think it should do and that we wanted to do.

And I know that my saying this might come across as pessimistic, but the hard truth is that the evidence is there to demonstrate that to be the case. Sadly so.

Jodi: You took the words out of my mouth. You actually in the treatise though talk about how abolitionist philosophy is deeply optimistic.

Rinaldo: Yes, because abolitionist philosophy is deeply optimistic because we do not believe that people are naturally bad. We believe that when people have access to the resources to live the kinds of lives that they need to live, that all human beings should be able to live, that conflict and violence decreases.

We believe that when people have access to the material wealth that is shared, that people are able to care for each other and to relish in each other's fullness of life. And that abolition, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, is also about presence. Meaning that we believe that when people are able to share equally in the collective abundance of what our earth has to offer, that we are present for each other in ways that are, if you will, it might and might sound a little bit airy fairy, but in ways that are magical. Because abolitionists do believe that human beings made from bone and words are magical beings.

Jodi: You hit on another question I asked myself as I was reading this book. And that's is a hierarchy and therefore the relegation of some to privilege a smaller group, is that inherent in the human condition? I hear you saying a resounding no. Is there evidence though? You're saying there's no evidence of sort of equity of opportunity producing good results. Is there any evidence that we're not kind of inherently bad?

Rinaldo: In the book, I write a little bit about the commons, and this idea of the commons which first comes out of what we now call Europe, was an idea where people shared in the bounty of the lands that they occupied. And then somehow the commons became restricted as hierarchy became a part of how people form their communities. And eventually monarchies came to encircle the commons, to fence off

the commons, and to claim the commons as the monarch's property. Offering the people access to it only as they might then use it to pay tribute to the monarch.

But the Indigenous cultures around the world, both in North America and elsewhere, the idea of the commons still exists. In fact, part of what we see with a lot of tension between Indigenous communities and the Canadian nation state is that there are different the two different notions of what land, property, and resources mean.

And of course Indigenous communities are in some ways drawing on the notion of the commons, that we are all… When Indigenous communities make the claim of being stewards of the land, protectors of the land, protectors of the water. that they're making a collective claim. They're making a non-hierarchical claim, they're making the claim for human beings as being a part of the environment and not the ruler of the environment.

And so that's the different worldview. And it's a worldview that in the imminent moment of climate change and a climate crisis, that I think that we're going to have to much more urgently take to heart.

So even if, then, there is not a history, even though I do think there is, and Indigenous cultures have demonstrated this. Not to say that there weren't some Indigenous cultures that were also hierarchical. That one of the things about abolitionist politics and abolitionist philosophy is when I said that human beings were magical is that we also profoundly believe that human beings can learn to live differently. That we don't have to be… That we're not inherently hierarchical. The hierarchical nature of our societies is something that has been learned, it's something that has been taught to us, and it's something that in fact takes a tremendous amount of violence to keep in place.

And we believe that we can learn to do different, that we can learn to live differently. That we can learn to live equally across difference and to share across difference, and to be responsible and ethical across difference.

Jodi: This is a show about risk. And I think one of the things you accomplish in *On Property* is when we talk about property risk, we normally think of it in terms of property loss. And you flip it and you say no, no, no it's not… Property risk is not about potentially losing your property, it's about the risks and the threats and the harms created by property itself. And I found that very fascinating.

Rinaldo: I'm really glad that you saw that in the work, because I would like to add then that I think that what we have to do is we have to take the risk that we can live differently. And taking that risk that we can live differently means that we have to take the risk that human beings are always malleable, always open to change, and that human beings are also always open to new possibility. That it's a risk to say, "I will trust and care for you even though I think you and I share nothing in common."

Jodi: The central question of this podcast is, do you truly value something if you're not thinking about how you could lose it. What's your response?

Rinaldo: I think that that's a really interesting and profound question, and my response is yes, I agree. And that *On Property* and the abolitionist philosophy that I tried to articulate here is exactly in accord with that, actually. That we have to risk losing the kind of society that we have built so far so that something newer, something more possible, something more fulfilling, something more life sustaining can come into being.

Jodi: Professor Rinaldo Walcott, thank you so much for joining me. I really enjoyed this conversation.

Rinaldo: Thank you so much for having me, Jodi, and I enjoyed the conversation too.