**“BLM, Abolition & Mutual Aid” - from the program “Chronically Chilled”**

**Host: Marijo Požega**

 **Guest: Vanamali (Mali) Hermans**

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*[Announcement:]*

WOMAN’S VOICE: My name’s Jane Rosengrave, and you're listening to a Yorta Yorta strong powerful woman on Disability Day, on 3CR!

ANNOUNCER: The following is a fantastic conversation between Vanamali Hermans and Marijo Požega on 3CR’s show Chronically Chilled. They talk about Black Lives Matter, abolition, mutual aid, and more. Vanamali, or Mali for short, is a Wiradjuri, Irish and Flemish woman living on Ngunnawal and Ngambri land. She is a disabled organiser and writer and has appeared on numerous podcasts. Mali is a board member of Women with Disabilities ACT, and currently works in gender-based violence policy alongside studying a Master of Social Work. The following was recorded in the midst of Black Lives Matter protests, and in the middle of the pandemic.

MALI: I feel like for a lot of people, especially thinking of Black people, thinking of Mob here, thinking of disabled people, thinking of anyone who's on the front line of not only the pandemic, but also this very big political uprising, yeah, it's a really tiring time for a lot of people. I feel very lucky, I did not lose my job during COVID, and I've been able to work from home so there's been some silver lining for me and that's made work a lot more bearable with chronic illness. But yeah, just tired hey. *[laughs]* It's a lot. I think too, I recently had my mum pass away, and so COVID and the pandemic has really stuffed up my grieving timeline. You know what I mean? It's not a normal trajectory. And so that's been pretty tough. But yeah, feeling pretty lucky to be healthy right now.

MARIJO: Yeah, I'm really sorry to hear about your mum.

MALI: Thank you.

MARIJO: Yeah. What's helping you to kind of get through this time? Because I think we've all been kind of trying to deal with it as best as we can, and so what's been helping you?

MALI: I'm writing a lot. I’ve been writing heaps, although a lot of it is stuff that I'll probably never publish, ever! But definitely writing, journaling as well. Big fan of journaling. And I think too, just the amount of events now that I can tune into online. Like I went to Overland’s launch last night and normally, you know? I feel like it's a different kind of culture now, and a lot of events would stream their events, but it's just not the same as everyone tuning in together online. So I think I've been doing a lot of that for a lot of social interactions, and that's been nice.

And then also just getting outside and going on long walks has been very grounding and very good. I was talking to a friend the other day... I feel like the bushfires felt like preparation for COVID because we were just stuck inside for five weeks when the air was too toxic to breathe. So yeah, just doing those little things to ground me I think.

MARIJO: Of course, because in Canberra it was really bad wasn't it? All the bushfires...

MALI: It was pretty bad. For a few days we had the worst air quality in the world. And we had to move our mattresses into our living room because that's the only place we have air conditioning. And then we would duct tape up the gaps in our doors and we put wet towels, as if there was a house fire. But there wasn't a house fire, it's just the smoke. I'm a renter, so it just got in. It's a very old house. So it's pretty suffocating, yeah, and I have asthma as well, so it’s like…

MARIJO: Oh gosh.

MALI: Yeah. *[laughing]*

MARIJO: Yeah, a lot of people have been commenting about the accessibility of having online events and stuff now. Making a huge difference in people's lives. What other things have you noticed that you want to hold on to post-pandemic?

MALI: I think on a material level, the $550 Coronavirus supplement first comes to mind *[both laugh]* I definitely want to hold on to that, and I also want to extend it to the DSP and the carer’s pension, without a question. And I feel like that is kind of a fight that—although it's part of the Keep the Rate campaign—has kind of been left behind a little bit. I think a lot of mainstream economic justice activists haven't really grasped how expensive it is to be disabled during a pandemic, you know? It's groceries delivered, getting medications delivered, changing them… I've had to change my medications during COVID, yeah.

So definitely the supplement, telehealth also. Amazing! Love that! But I think on a different level, too, I feel like socially, well at least I feel like I am living my life at a slower pace. I saw people tweeting the other day about ‘crip time’ and I haven't ever really used the word or phrase ‘crip time’ before, but I'm like: yes! That's what this is for me. I feel like my body is getting to recover. But at the same time slowing down a bit, I'm like, I’ve been going way too fast! And I didn't realise just how bad it was having an affect on my body. Yeah, so definitely want to keep that.

But also, I think the one thing I would say is that… I am a bit hesitant to say that COVID has just been all silver linings and that there are heaps of things you want to keep. Because I think about my dad who's also disabled, and he can't use the internet. You know what I mean? So I feel like for older people, and for people who maybe don't have access to the internet, all these things that have opened up for us, actually are governed by a huge digital divide still, and I think we really have to be aware of that.

MARIJO: Totally. Yeah, my dad’s got some health issues as well, and they organised a telehealth appointment for him. And he can barely speak English. So telehealth has been awesome for me. But for my dad, he's not gonna get anything out of it.

MALI: Exactly.

MARIJO: Why the doctors even organised it, I have no idea. You know, for some people, this stuff has been really good, and for other people it hasn’t.

MALI: Yeah.

MARIJO: It's easy. It's easy, because you don't actually hear from those people very often, around…

MALI: Exactly, yeah. Because what is their entryway into mainstream discourse? They're not going to be tweeting about their shitty experiences on Twitter.

MARIJO: I think it's up to us not to forget them as well.

MALI: Exactly. Yeah, for sure.

MARIJO: Let's talk abolition stuff.

MALI: Yes. I love it!

MARIJO: *[laughs]* So yeah, what's emerged from the Black Lives Matter movement is a real surge in abolitionist politics, and conversations about what that would look like. I never thought that we would get to this point so quickly, I guess. I don't know what other people think…

MALI: No, neither did I.

MARIJO: But intersecting with this is also incredibly high levels of incarceration, and institutionalisation faced by people with disability. Can you talk more about it?

MALI: Yeah, for sure. First, I’d preface and say yeah, I never thought it would be in my lifetime, that abolitionist politics would actually be, you know, this critical moment where it's actually a global discussion—that is just beyond me. And I feel really lucky to be watching everything unfold. And yeah, I think I've been interested in abolition for a couple of years. And obviously, that stemmed from classics, like *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis. And I didn't really incorporate that disability justice lens until my own family's experiences with institutionalisation.

So, following a suite of different hospital stays, my mum, her only option was to live in a group home, from around early 2018 up until her death. And yeah, I didn't understand what group homes were, but she was a quadriplegic, and she had a level of needs that the NDIS was just not willing to fund in her own house. And so, yeah, she was locked away in a group home with four other women with disabilities. And it was an institution, the way it was run, you know, run to a set schedule. It was not a home in the way that you would consider a home, you were constantly being—the only word I can say is—policed, in your different behaviours and things like that. And that was when I was like, shit, she's been separated from the community, and she's never going to be allowed back into the community because of her disabilities.

And so I think, yeah, that was when I grew my idea of abolition to not only prisons, but like, what actually are carceral institutions? So how do we disappear people, and how do we lock people away? In prisons, of course, but in group homes, and even looking at nursing homes, for instance. I saw a tweet yesterday or the day before, and it was just so beautifully put, it was so succinct. It was like, “abolition is care,” and to me, that is at the root of abolitionist politics. To me, it's transforming not only justice, so investing in transformative justice, but also transforming the way that we care for one another. So that we don't have to rely on institutions like group homes, we don't have to rely on nursing homes and lock all the folks away. I think that's incredibly important.

And yeah, even thinking of the pandemic… what is it? It's up to 45% or so of people in the US who have died as a result of COVID have been people in nursing homes. That's not only older folks, but disabled folks have been institutionalised there too. And the amount of people in our prisons now who have disabilities, it's like, up to half of everyone into the same… Even looking at police brutality, the amount of people killed by police. It's up to 50% of people.

And I think that's an intersection that we have to always be very mindful of, and especially I think in the disability rights movement, it can be very white. People often forget about black and indigenous experiences of disability as well, and how things like mental illness or what people might call psychosocial disability... that's read very differently if you're a black person, and that can lead to your institutionalisation or death if you're angry about being fucking oppressed! So yeah, I think this is such an exciting time. And I am so here for all the different discussions about care, and what community might look like for people who have been shut away from community for so long.

MARIJO: Yeah. I think what makes this really hard is that Australia loves to lock people up, and it loves to police. And I think we've all been trained in some ways to be deputies as well and to police each other, and it's also another layer to all of this. We're very quick to dob each other in. And I'm thinking also about homeless people—we’re very quick to just call the cops on homeless people, for example, rather than looking at the larger structural kind of disadvantage and oppression that they face as well. So I think there’s lots of different communities and lots of different groups that we need to include in all this, as well.

MALI: Yeah, for sure. I think first and foremost, it necessitates a lot of our work being led by people who have experienced incarceration, who've experienced institutionalisation, who have experienced homelessness, for instance. Because yeah, frankly I don't think people understand the psychological effect that being disappeared or being locked away has unless, yeah, you've lived it. So I think that that is a really important aspect to the conversation.

And yeah, just on a root level, I don't think we can talk about abolitionists politics in Australia, without talking about colonialism, without talking about, like, what is the history of prisons? You know, why do we use prisons in Australia? This was a fucking penal colony, when it was invaded to start off with, and yeah, it's hard to see it, because it ever since 1788, it has literally been the purpose of this place, of this settlement. It has been to imprison people, and I think until that is actually grappled with, what's the point? You can't… yeah.

MARIJO: Yeah, that's definitely the first point. And I guess it's what's been—comparing what's happening in the US compared to what's been happening in Australia—I think the US has stayed really, really focused in terms of “this is about this is about Black people being killed by the police”. And “this is about ending, defunding police or abolishing police” and all that stuff. And I feel like the conversation in Australia has already been diverted. Like it went from about Aboriginal deaths in custody, this is kind of what it's all about. And it's been diverted into pop culture, and statues and stuff. And I think the government, with the help of the media has really done that. I think, kind of done a really good—sneakily—job of kind of diverting the conversation...

MALI: 360, yeah.

MARIJO: Yeah so they’ve diverted the conversation already. Yeah, and this is a hard question as well, but how do we stay focused and not get diverted?

MALI: Well, I think I would say that organisers of Black deaths in custody rallies have stayed focused, you know? We've been doing this shit for fucking years. And I think it's up to people who suddenly have seen this political moment in the US—and they've recognised it in the Australian context—but making sure that it's not just a one off thing for people. In the US, I think people are realising, as an ally or as whatever, as an organiser or someone who's invested in transformative justice, I need to commit my time, my organising, my resources to this cause, and I still think that that is something that's very far off for a lot of people in Australia.

And I see a lot of people commenting and I agree to a large extent that they can empathise with the struggles of black people in the US and not empathise with, you know, our struggles, Mob struggles here in Australia. And how to change that? I see so many amazing, deadly Mob on Twitter and in my life, doing such staunch, amazing work. People keep going on but it's like, there's only so much you can do to turn… you know what I mean? Like I feel like…

MARIJO: It's up to the rest of us yeah?

MALI: Literally, yeah. And, yeah. Steering the conversation back, too… that's such a hard question. I just *[laughing]* the Australian media… it’s just a beast… Like how the fuck does Pauline Hanson still have like a regular Channel 7 slot? Yeah.

MARIJO: Yeah, it's been so normalised, that's what I was saying before. We've normalised locking people up. And asylum seekers as well you know, yeah. With huge support from the population. And I think that whole thing about how we treat disabled people as well, that's also been so normalised.

MALI: Totally.

MARIJO: Yeah, so when we're talking about abolition, what do you think it could look like, from a disability justice perspective?

MALI: From a disability justice perspective, I think coming back to that conversation around care, I think it definitely looks like completely transforming the way that we care for each other. And also, how do we even talk about disability? Like, obviously, the social model of disability is what policymakers use, right?

MARIJO: Yeah.

MALI: I don't think that's true from my own experience of disability, from my family's experiences of disability. It is just medicalising people and problematising people and pushing this narrative that people are a fucking burden and that they need to be managed in some way. And I think programmes like the NDIS that are supposed to be about empowerment and choice and control, are not actually about those things. And similarly, push those narratives onto people that like, “you are a problem, you need to be managed,” and shit like that.

And so actually bringing in abolitionist perspectives to that just seems so far off to me. But how do we do it? I think, conversations around care, and I think, too, some of the mutual aid we've been seeing are really really good examples—not only during COVID but during the bushfires too—because it shows that as a community we can sustain each other, we can distribute resources amongst each other, and we can ensure people's needs are met, without making them feel like a burden. You know what I mean? We can be like, “hey,” to my neighbour next door, ”do you need a puffer? I've got a spare puffer, here’s a puffer for you.” And I think those are some of the very elemental first steps that we're seeing, and that can lead us down that pathway.

MARIJO: Yeah, you've already talked about the concept of care a few times. And when I was preparing for this, I've actually got care written as something that I kind of think is also really important, and how do we kind of encourage it. And it was really interesting, during this whole COVID thing, I feel like when COVID initially… became a thing in Australia and stuff, I felt there was a real care for each other in the community, and “how do we look out for each other?” And all this kind of stuff. And I felt like that lasted a few weeks, maybe *[laughing]* and then we all just went back to our individual lives, and everybody's not even social distancing anymore, and it's all become about rules, yeah. So it's kind of a fleeting thing that we actually have a real hard time hanging on to.

MALI: I think that's a really good point. I can see distinct stages in everyone realising we're in a global pandemic, we're in this shared crisis, and then it disintegrating into people panic buying into this mindset of “I have to preserve me and my family,” and that's it. Like “I have to keep myself safe.” And you raise a really good point, which I totally agree with. It's just like, we suddenly lurched into this horrible discourse of let's police each other. Let’s introduce restrictions that weren't actually… I'm not advocating against a lot of the restrictions that we’ve seen, but the way that they've been framed, it's like you're either good or bad if you're following the restrictions, rather than actually acknowledging, “why are we doing what we're doing in the first place? Why are we social distancing?” It's because there are people in our community who are immunocompromised, because we're connected, and we actually have to hold each other accountable to one another, and protect each other in this broader ecosystem, and I think that that has totally been thrown out the door. And it's rather about, “you're not wearing a mask, therefore you're a shit person and I'm gonna dob you in,” you know what I mean? Yeah.

MARIJO: Which is I think why I was talking about things being normalised before. I think that's why when you see people react in Australia to the concept of the idea of abolition, it's one of complete shock. And they’re just like, “what does that even mean? How do we? That does not make it even anything for me.” And I'm not even talking about people who would be against it anyway, I'm talking about people who might be curious about it. But if even they find it really hard to kind of imagine what that might look like.

MALI: Yeah, it's hard to conceptualise it when literally like… think of the stages of life… when you get old, you get put into an old folks home. If you get disabled or if you get—for want of a better word— if you get crippled, you're going to go to an institution. If you're bad, if you break society's rules, you're going to go to an institution. I remember, there was a great Q&A panel with Nayuka Gorrie on it a couple of years ago. I think maybe it was the panel when people were talking about burning shit down. I can't remember properly...

MARIJO: Not one that got not the one that got banned?

MALI: I don't think so. But there was a great quote, it was like, “it's literally how Australia deals with problems,” we don't know any different. This country does not know any different, apart from locking people up.

MARIJO: Totally.

MALI: So I think that, you know, even for people who would consider themselves leftists, it's such a foreign idea.

MARIJO: Absolutely, and you talked before about what we’re going to need in this is for people with lived experience and from community to lead this kind of process. But I think there's a real myth around all that stuff as well, around consultation. And I think there's a lot of bullshit consultation that happens. I think there's a lot of bullshit inclusion stuff that happens. Yeah, and when we're talking consultation, or when we're talking that kind of stuff, we're really talking about process. But process without power is just more systemic abuse.

MALI: I totally agree. Me and a friend, we… I think in metaphors a lot, I find it really easy to visualise, and we came up with a really nice metaphor for this process: a lot of people talking about having a seat at the table, a seat at the dinner table, whatever. I feel like a lot of the time what actually passes as a seat at the dinner table is everyone having a really lovely meal, and the next day they show up at your door with some leftovers, and they're like, “here, we included you.”

MARIJO: If that!

MALI: Yeah, literally. If that! Yeah, I totally agree. I think consultation’s bullshit. I want to see abolitionist politics, and I want to see politics in this country that is rooted in self determination, and for Mob is rooted in sovereignty, you know?

MARIJO: Yeah. And in that process, someone has to give up power.

MALI: I think, too, that this is a great conversation to have in the disability community, because I, along with a lot of other disabled people, fucking hate the fact that a lot of conversations about disability in this country are led by disability service providers. As if service providers—the people who provide us often sub-par care, or are the people who are policing us in these institutions—are the people who get to speak on disability?

MARIJO: Yeah.

MALI: And I feel like in Australia, when people see disability, they're like, “oh, cool, life without barriers,” like they can speak on disability… you know what I mean?

MARIJO: Well, I think part of the problem is like a lot of these services, and also the government as well seen the solution to disability, where it's all individually based. So yeah, in the NDIS it all sounds great. We're going to give choice to individuals and choice to people around making decisions about their lives and stuff. But there's actually no collective element in the NDIS, which makes it hard for people to actually come together and to organise around it. So there's actually not many places at all, for disabled people to come together and have these conversations and to organise and to have different ideas and to tackle some of these organisations that are really problematic.

MALI: Yeah, I agree. And, just on a tangent, even thinking back on the Disability Royal Commission, I remember, one of the first days, one of the first hearings, I'm pretty sure it was on education. And no people with experience in what I would call ‘segregated education settings’, got to speak or testify. It was all the teachers and the principals, and the teachers unions, who were responsible for these settings in the first place. But people would see the Disability Royal Commission and be like, “great, disabled people are being heard!” And I think that's one of my pet peeves, is that consultation is not the same as self determination.

MARIJO: Absolutely, yeah that's really well said. So you've already talked about mutual aid. So I think that's one of the things also that's come out of COVID-19 is there's been a big rise in mutual aid organising, and there's really a failure of services, to respond to them, especially marginalised communities, and also disabled people who, a lot of people are still isolating and stuff. So can you explain a little bit more about mutual aid and kind of a little bit more about your experiences?

MALI: Yes, actually, that is a good way of putting it. Mutual aid is for when the state does fail to provide material resources for people. But I've recently been having conversations with friends and other disabled activists, and I like their way of framing it too. It's like, well mutual aid might be the phrase we call it now that's in, but really, we've been doing this for a very long time, and it's how communities have survived. We wouldn't always necessarily call it mutual aid, but it's like, sharing resources with one another, and making sure that if you know someone doesn't have access to something and you do have access to it, opening that up, and it comes back again. I don't want to keep saying this word, but a different way of care where you realise, “it's within my power to help this person. If I have this resource, I'm going to share it, I'm going to be very cognizant of their needs, and be cognizant that their needs probably are not going to be met by the state.”

MARIJO: That was disabled organiser and writer Vanamali Hermans. You can listen to all of the Chronically Chilled episodes via podcast, which you can find at 3cr.org.au. So if you search for “Chronically Chilled” on the site, you'll be able to find us there. You can also follow us on iTunes as well, if you would like. I just want to thank Mali again for coming onto the show, and also thank you for listening.