
**NOTES TOWARD
AN ABOLITIONIST ALIENOCENE**



INGRID DIRAN

I.

In the face of entrenched oppressive structures like the prison or the police, abolitionists have brandished what now appears as a distinctly “Holocene” weapon: *denaturalization*. For while denaturalization undoes the apparent naturalness of institutions and relationships that comprise the social order—revealing the presence of this order to be the absence of justice—denaturalization also presupposes, by definition, a bedrock of real Nature beneath what is constructed. This presupposition is what betrays it as a Holocene artifact, since it is unclear what it means to denaturalize a world already undergoing a profound upheaval of its natural systems. Indeed, what can denaturalization (still) do and become in a denatured world—in an Alienocene? What is denaturalization after or beyond the horizon of Nature?

The stakes of such a question are not merely academic. They bear on the political efficacy and critical project of abolition itself, whose denaturalizing thrust has hinged on the fact that apparently “natural” institutions are not merely unjust but, in fact, *obsolete*.¹ However, if denaturalization is central to the abolitionist imaginary, and there is less and less that can lay claim to being natural, abolitionists must contend with the possibility that it is denaturalization itself which is now obsolete.²

¹ Obsolescence describes the peculiar status of something which exists after the purpose for which it was designed has perished. It features prominently in the following argument for three reasons. First, because, as already suggested, it seems to characterize the status of de/naturalization. Second, obsolescence has a privileged role to play in abolitionist discourse, describing the historical situation in which abolition takes place. In her 2003 *Are Prisons Obsolete*, for example, Angela Davis stakes the entire case for prison abolition on a demonstration of its obsolescence. Third, that which is obsolete implies an affective and material register of *alienation*, whose encounter is that of an alien life form. In this last respect, obsolescence proves to be a key concept for imagining our age of crumbling naturalizations as an Alienocene.

² It is worth voicing a potential objection, which holds that denaturalization is not tautological in a denatured world because it takes aim not at nature per se, but at the social process of *naturalization*, the process by which the fundamental contingency of

What follows are notes toward an abolitionist response to this provocation, one that, I believe, will only become more pressing as life on this planet becomes increasingly alien to those seeking justice upon it. I approach the question by examining the conceptual node that links naturalization to reactionary violence, and reactionary violence to obsolescence. When seen as part of an Alienocene—a space and time which forces us to rethink every horizon of critique (including the role of horizons *for* critique)—this node plainly shows denaturalization’s quasi-tautological character. But, as will be shown, the Alienocene also brings into all the explicitness of an ob-scenity what constitutes, by now, the worn historical tactic of reactionary violence: *absorbing* the charge of obsolescence by *reversing* its political valence so that *obsolescence*, not timeliness or necessity, becomes the pretext for perpetuating injustice.³ The Alienocene has the virtue of speaking as ob-scenity that which has too long gone by the name of *reform*.

By way of example, I offer a schematic history of American policing (which is also a history of its reforming) in which the *naturalization of obsolescence* has furnished grounds for perpetuating racial violence from the era of slave patrols to that of police commissions. The moments traced here in constellation demonstrate that the same racial violence which lays claim to a natural order has just as often been waged on grounds that reforms to this order are *inevitable*. Naturalizing this *obsolescence* of violence in proleptic terms ensures not the order but the *persistence* of violence.

structures gets obscured and dehistoricized. This objection is of crucial significance because it clarifies the terrain upon which the denaturalizing thrust of abolition practically unfolds. The goal has never been to restore things to their Nature, but rather to dismantle destructive forms that assume the mantle of Nature as their mode of justification. Yet if it is increasingly true that Nature is literally and figuratively awash in history, then the original question stands, since naturalization—more than denaturalization—requires the category of Nature for intelligibility. In raising the question of what denaturalization becomes without Nature, we must pose the parallel question of what naturalization becomes under the same circumstances. *Is naturalization obsolete?*

³ I thank Frédéric Neyrat for this linkage of Alienocene epistemology to the ob-scene.

II.

The term Alienocene refers, in principle, to a denatured world. It suggests that this world is not only alienated *from* itself, but alien *to* itself. Something important changes in the shift from nominalization to noun: the horizon of familiarity, from which every *alienation* obtains its meaning, is gone. The *alien* appears in its place. And what appears *in* this place is beyond place, *ob-scene*.

If we return to the example of the carceral system, we see this shift in the bipartisan criminal-justice legislation in the United States, such as The First Step Act of 2019 (which significantly shortens sentences in federal prisons), that has followed in the wake of a decades-long prison boom. Absent in these new laws is any tether to prison's naturalness; it is replaced by a putatively clear-eyed assessment, from "both sides," that change is necessary. At the level of governance, there appears nothing left to denaturalize. Prison reform has become an inevitability.

Nevertheless, since the summer of 2020, the call for prison (and police) abolition has burst through the mainstream with an urgency that has surprised of many stalwarts of contemporary abolitionism. A figure no less foundational than Angela Davis—whose 2003 book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* first systematically laid out the case for prison abolition—has registered shock at abolition's new discursive currency. The shock consists, in Davis's case, less in the consensus that prisons *are* obsolete than in the political valence of the consensus itself.⁴ Less than twenty years ago, her argument was radical because few dared to suggest that life without prisons was possible or desirable. Today, abolition may still be regarded as utopian, but the consensus, especially on the right, is that reform is on its way. In other words, the denaturalization of prisons has become a matter of common sense. It is now prison's *obsolescence*, rather than the prison itself, that has become *naturalized*.

This development stands in a peculiar relation to Davis's original argument, which hinged on prison's ideological function as "an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the

⁴ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.

responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers” (16). Rather than refuting this idea, contemporary naturalizers of prison obsolescence replace racist myths of innate criminality with racist myths of innate helplessness and injury. Rather than merely “impute crime to color” (in Frederick Douglass’s canny phrase) as has long been American custom, the new naturalizers racialize vulnerability in the wake of social abandonment. Take, for instance, the oft-maligned reference to “American carnage” in Trump’s inaugural address. The key to this remark lies in the preceding paragraph, which decries: “Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.” The presidential fiat that “this American carnage stops right here and stops right now” simultaneously laments and requires that “carnage” in fact prevail.⁵ Any optimism is belied by the language of trapping, tombs, deprivation and theft which enshrine carnage as the abiding condition of American life.

Proponents of this American condition would thus all too eagerly corroborate Davis’s assertion that “larger prison populations led not to safer communities, but, rather, to even larger prison populations” (12). However, framed as a modality of national carnage, such a statement serves less to dismantle structures that differentially produce vulnerability than to justify their proliferation, now under the auspices of “protecting” the ravaged as well as the innocent and righteous. The ravaged will be governed by the righteous through ever-evolving carceral means, from municipal fines to militarized policing to algorithmic abandonment.⁶

To defend the prison today is therefore to vigorously defend its reform, thereby guaranteeing the reproduction of differential

⁵ See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

⁶ See, for example, Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2018), and McKenzie Wark’s commentary on Wang’s analysis of algorithmic governance in “Prisoners of the Algorithm: On Jackie Wang,” <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4846-prisoners-of-the-algorithm-on-jackie-wang>

vulnerability through the persistence of state violence that is always already outdated.

III.

I suggested above that the Alienocene announces a *nec plus ultra* beyond which the *cognition* of what is natural(ized) no longer furnishes *re-cognition* in a normative sense. This implies that Holocene categories, institutions, and ideas are largely obsolete and that this very fact has become a new (non-)ground of naturalization.

When obsolescence becomes the tactical pretext for reactionary violence, it forces a pivot in the tactic and logic of abolition. As Davis and Bettina Aptheker said of state violence in 1971: “Fascism represents the triumph of the counterrevolution, that is, fascism is the *preventive counter-revolution* to the socialist transformation of society.”⁷ In the contemporary context, we might say that the counterrevolution concerns only a “preventive” co-optation of denaturalization and obsolescence. This has forced the abolitionist use and valence of both terms to shift again, into an alien register able to meet the fascist obscenity head on.

Thus, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and James Kilgore refer to abolition as “a practical program of change rooted in how people sustain and improve their lives, cobbling together insights and strategies from disparate, connected struggles.”⁸ Cobbling already implies that the ground of action is uneven and that abolition builds even as it breaks. In an abolitionist frame, moreover, the obsolescence of institutions is not understood as the *effect* of epistemic and political erosion of what was once functional but, on the contrary, as an unremitting *cause* of such erosion itself. Obsolescence, that is, is the historical index of a given deployment of reactionary violence: institutions like slavery or the prison

⁷ Angela Y. Davis and Bettina Aptheker, “Preface,” *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, ed. Davis, Aptheker, and other members of the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners (New York: Verso, 2016), 13.

⁸ Ruth Wilson Gilmore and James Kilgore, “The Case for Abolition,” *The Marshall Project* (June 19, 2019): <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/06/19/the-case-for-abolition>

or the police have each emerged onto the historical scene as *residual* forms of other forms of violence (sovereign, feudal, etc.). As such, they have corroded social life by avowing corrosion and inviting reform; they achieve political, ecological, and social dissolution by declaring themselves dissolute from the start.

Gilmore's abolitionist Marxism pivots around weaponized in practical terms. It concerns identification of the nodes and geography by which systemic force denatures and dissolves bonds of community. She writes:

We used to think that in the United States, contemporary mass unfreedom, racially organized, must be a recapitulation of slavery's money-making scheme. But if these massive carceral institutions, weighted like cities, are not factories and service centers, then where's the profit, the surplus money at the end of the day? Today's prisons are extractive. What does that mean? It means prisons enable money to move because of the enforced *inactivity* of people locked in them. It means people extracted from communities, and people returned to communities but not entitled to be of them, enable the circulation of money on rapid cycles. What's extracted from the extracted is *the* resource of life–time.

If we think about this dynamic through the politics of scale, understanding bodies as places, then criminalization transforms individuals into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold—extracting and extracting again *time* from the territories of selves. This process opens a hole in a life, furthering, perhaps, to our surprise, the annihilation of space by time. A stolen and corrupted social wage flies through that time-hole to prison employees' paychecks. To vendors. To utility companies. To contractors. To debt service. The cash takes many final forms: wages, interest, rent, and sometimes profit. But more to the point, the extractive process brings the mechanics of contemporary imperialism to mind: extraction, in money form, from direct producers whose communities are destabilized too. But money, too, gives us some insight into the enormity of the possible inhabitants and makers of abolition geographies—abolition geography, the antagonistic contradiction of carceral geographies, forms an interlocking pattern across the terrain of racial capitalism. We see it.⁹

⁹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso, 2017), 227.

Gilmore's diagnostic of the political economy of the prison refutes the notion that it is a "recapitulation" of slavery, a throwback that has simply been modernized (which, given how the political economy of slavery was itself dissimulated under the sign of feudalism, would amount to a throwback to a throwback). Rather, today's prisons function through obscene strategies of primitive accumulation that extract from immobilized bodies their *time*. If slavery, too, compelled "mass unfreedom, racially organized" to extract surplus from forced labor, the contemporary carceral system's inexorable contemporaneity consists in techniques of forced idleness. Bodies can be mined for "the resource of life-time" only by being compelled *not* to move or work. Their value is thereby reconstituted from labor into surplus.

Extracted non-labor-power is monetized through time of detention and circulated as a "stolen and corrupted social wage." Yet time still constitutes something more or other than a *wage*, since it presupposes a deformation of labor-time that renders the unworking body a direct producer of value. Bodies in suspended animation set the fungibility of time in relief, achieving a perverse congelation of sinew into surplus. Time, therefore, comprises a resource unlike any other; neither vegetable nor mineral nor animal, atomically *weightless* and yet directly produced by the living in their social death. The wages of this new racial regime of unfreedom powers an economy of debts whereby bodies *stolen*, social relations *displaced*, communities *dissolved*, lives *lost*, amount to money *made*.

This economy cuts and feeds through a "hole in life" that, if we follow Gilmore's logic, is also a *Black hole* gaping between bodies that, at sufficient scale, look like "tiny territories," minute planets reduced to the time they perdure in the otherworldly space of the prison. This is an "annihilation of space by time" more astonishing than any Marx could have imagined.

But to the very extent that Gilmore's account glimpses such an unnatural institution not as primitive or obsolete but as an emergent and efficacious form of social dissolution, it develops, from within the carceral logic, a strange, real, and *free* physics of abolitionist antagonism. "Interlocking patterns" of filiation emerge across the expanse of racial

capitalism, opposing the carceral by disposing of its unnatural gaps and alien apertures as places to make and remake. “Abolition geography starts,” Gilmore asserts, “from the homely premise that freedom is a place.”

To eradicate freedom places and place-making is the express purpose of the police.

IV.

A key thesis of Khalil Gibran Muhammad’s *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern Urban America* is that the project of policing on the land that would become the United States has always been an evolving phalanx of imperial/alien projects seeking to transmute theft into territory.¹⁰ In colonial Virginia, for example, Muhammad describes how two coeval and co-implicated formations emerged to this end: private militias, to patrol the borders of stolen land, and slave patrols, to surveil the movement of stolen bodies. Together, militarized the boundaries of colonies in a campaign of counterinsurgency. Laws demanded that men serving on militias double as slave patrollers as Indian wars that could always invert into widespread slave rebellions. The topology of threat was that of a mobius strip, which policing wove around, consolidating the white community. Thus, argues Muhammad, in slaveholding colonies (and, later, in the southern American states), mandatory slave patrols actively produced the racial citizenship of patrollers through the dissolution of Black solidarity, establishing thereby what W.E.B. Du Bois famously terms the “wages of whiteness.” Slave patrols transmuted the theft of Black mobility into a binding agent for middling and upper-class white nationalism. The destruction of Black communities became the mortar of white ones.

By the time of the nation’s founding, policing had been racializing citizenship this way for two centuries. As Muhammad remarks in a gloss of his work, “the fact of chattel slavery...served as social insurance against insurrection, and dissent, and potential political rebellion, of the majority

¹⁰ Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness* (Cambridge & London: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010)

of landless *white men* who didn't have slaves and lived precarious lives."¹¹ Postbellum Black Codes—formed by a loophole of the 13th amendment that banned forced servitude “except as punishment for a crime”—offered legal means, after emancipation, for criminalizing every form of black freedom, mobility, and political power, except for the right to work for a white man on the white man's terms. Black codes also required a new law enforcement constituency which, as Muhammad details, took the form of burgeoning police bureaucracy in the 1870s, paired with earlier or “obsolete” forms of state-sanctioned terror. A year after emancipation, in 1866, the KKK was founded in Tennessee.

Muhammad recounts that around the same time, Northern industrializing cities developed their own police forces, modeled after the London Metropolitan police. The latter was formed by an 1829 act of Parliament, which prioritized crime prevention, visibility, and militaristic structure to enmesh policing within the daily life of then the world's largest city. Mitigating the risks of adjacency, the London police criminalized the very idea of equality. Police were charged with patrolling subjugation in the metropole as colonial armies were doing in Africa and Asia. Old British colonial cities like New York and Philadelphia adapted the London model to control their own rapidly industrialized spaces. In a place like New York, however, working classes were increasingly comprised of heterogeneous immigrant populations from sites in Europe, directly or indirectly, rendered unlivable by the British. For native-born wealthy and middle classes of the north, these immiserated immigrants generated much the same anxiety as African Americans had in the South.

In Muhammad's estimation, Northern policing increasingly came, by the twentieth century, to be polarized between professionalization, which standardized rules of force, and stratification, which stratified implementation of force. The office of police was open to men from the lower classes, including first-generation immigrants, but it placed racial dynamics among immigrant groups directly under police control. The

¹¹ Abdelfatah, Rund and Ramtin Arablouei, co-hosts. “American Police.” *Throughline* podcast, NPR, 4 June 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/03/869046127/american-police>

strata manifested economically, with poorest immigrants slated at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. They were expected to build the infrastructure of Northern cities much as Black convicts were expected to build and rebuild the infrastructure of the New South; to do otherwise was to break the law. At the same time, racial hierarchy was more complicated and fragmented in the North than in the South, given the plurality of ethnicities and the volatility of relations among them. Some of these groups began to coalesce around labor organizing and unionization. Whatever race they had been, they risked turning Red.

Muhammad explains how policing then shifted, in subsequent years, into the formation of so-called Red Squads, which cracked down on organizing activities. Racial dynamics being diminished through wage labor and organizing, police were now empowered to directly protect the interests of capital. Officers were increasingly drawn from the lower classes, at once reducing and patrolling the numbers of dissidents. If labor activists represented an inter-ethnic, deracialized constituency among the working class, Red Squads represented an inter-class constituency between the middling classes and elites. An ethnically fragmented police force, backed by industrial capital, unified in order to dissolve the threat posed by working-class revolution.

If history were frozen at this moment, around 1894, one might witness two forms of American policing—one Northern, the other Southern, one anti-Red, the other anti-Black. Yet, the neatness of this symmetry quickly changed. As a new influx of Black migrants from the South grew in Northern cities, the meaning of race reverted from a crowded field of rivals to something more fundamentally American: *all* of these groups vs. Black migrants from the South. While this racial dichotomization did not happen all at once, it accelerated upon return of the first world war veterans to the North. Anti-Black hostility, Muhammad notes, began to grow among immigrants, *especially* labor activists, who saw the desperation of Black migrants as *competition*, perfect for busting unions and ending strikes. So, the immigrant working class now shifted its focus to intimidating and terrorizing Black communities *with the help of police*. Within a generation, Northern policing went from overtly patrolling “Reds” to protecting an enlarged pool of new, white “ethnics” against a

Black threat. This threat reappeared anywhere interlocking patterns of Black life recreated themselves in the North.

The deadly combination of racial hatred and economic fear of African Americans erupted in two dozen race riots before 1920, paroxysms of violence that had the same consolidating effect for European immigrant groups that they had once had for non-black men of military age in the South: it made them *white*. While the Prohibition period saw policing pivot around the fact that organized crime was preferable, for the ruling class, to organized labor, Muhammad shows that by the time of the massive financial crash of 1929, measures to professionalize, centralize, and bureaucratize the police institution were entirely governed by and orchestrated around the further consolidation of whiteness. As he details, the 1931 Wickersham Commission, which was the most systematic effort to date reform the criminal justice system, concluded that police were corrupt and brutal to all groups *except* for African Americans, and inaccurately reported a *decrease* of racist police violence against Black people. Presenting European victims of police violence as *economic* victims of Gilded Age Capitalism, the Commission informed New Deal legislation, ushering in a period of rehabilitation and compassion for formerly stigmatized immigrant groups—at the expense, once more, of Black communities. Crime statistics for European immigrant demographics were discontinued, expunged from police records, while such information continued, with renewed insistence, to be kept for Blacks. This modernized the obsolete, disproven myth of Black criminality into the technical form of statistical evidence. These data points remain a bedrock of police science and computing into our current day.

V.

As Muhammad's history shows, the obscenity of police violence consists not simply in its brutality or persistence but in the fact that it has coincided, at every moment, with the project of police *reform*. Slave patrols were a reform of slaveholding, not ancillary to but constitutive of the slave economy and reformed out of existence only by nationalization of plantation capitalism. Professionalized police in the Northern states precisely *re-formed* the monolithic power of whiteness by co-opting the

deracializing thrust of labor struggle. At each phase, policing anticipates the obsolescence of its tactics only to re-form itself around it—to the extent, finally, of defining itself entirely, as today, on iterative, algorithmic principles.

Yet the express purpose of policing is not the same as its enabling condition, which is also that of its abolition. The latter is the persistence of place-making—of freedom—in the midst, as the midst—of its eradication. Freedom is the exorbitant condition of reform and the increasingly unthinkable horizon of its obscenity. So perhaps it is freedom, now or again, that occupies—and *makes*—the place which alien has assumed from alienation. Perhaps it is freedom, in this Alienocene, that can no longer be *re-pressed* in the name of its re-formation, but only confirmed by obscenities carried out in its name.¹²

¹² Once more, I thank Frédéric for helping me arrive at these insights.