

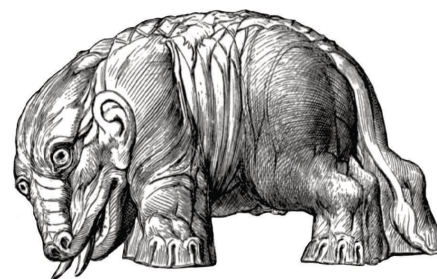
Editorial: Abolitionist Futures

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In her recently published book *Becoming Abolitionists* (2021), U.S. activist Derecka Purnell describes how she became an abolitionist. The book begins with an account of her childhood in an impoverished St. Louis neighborhood. The police were omnipresent here. They were the only responsive authority on many matters, from a too-loud party or minor injuries to mental health crises or grave cases of violence. Purnell describes how, over the course of her life, the police increasingly lost the status of a taken-for-granted presence: roused by the mostly unpunished murders of black poor people by the police, Purnell began to question more and more the necessity of this institution – and of the entire state apparatus on which it is based. Starting with the realization that calling the cops rarely actually solved a problem, she began to look at history, to talk to activists, to organize. The starting point for her thinking about alternatives was the already existing practices of her own community: for her, “abolition” is not an event of a radical break in a utopian future, but an experimental practice embedded in the existing everyday routines of marginalized communities. Abolitionism, as a radical political movement and historical study, reconstructs these experiments, assembles them and incorporates them into a coherent theoretical approach. Purnell’s book ends with a series of political proposals that start from the concrete reality of those communities: in order to make the police and the penal system obsolete, significant venues for democratic self-government (‘councils’), a reliable social and medical infrastructure, and new forms of neighborhood conflict resolution are needed. But even before such demands are achieved in the society at large, abolition is present as an ethos: instead of calling the police, abolitionists seek to build communities of solidarity that are able to manage their own problems while also struggling for societal transformation.

Purnell’s path can be understood as paradigmatic for the specific transformational strategy of abolitionism. Abolitionism is an umbrella term that encompasses theoretical and practical movements that seek to overcome state violence in its various forms (especially prison, police, and camps) while also addressing forms of extralegal or interpersonal violence (Davis 2003; Critical Resistance 2008; Kaba 2021; Davis/Dent/Meiners/Richie 2022). The concept of abolition explicitly places itself in the tradition of the transnational struggle for the abolition of slavery in the Americas in the 19th century and works through the possibilities of alternative formations of (re-)production, relations and forms of belongings which were exercised in the realms of the Haitian revolution, Maroon and

Some of the texts in this issue were contributions to the (online) workshop “What does it mean to abolish (state power)?”, hosted by the University of Amsterdam in early 2021. The videos of all talks are available here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlx9omWm2uvv1-DAQuQAd6Zdl1AS2Zd1QJ>.



Quilombo formations as well as anti-colonial resistance projects (Du Bois 1935; Robinson 1983; Sinha 2016). Contemporary political movements and radical thinkers thus recall the unfulfilled desires and demands associated with emancipation from enslavement and colonialism. A central concern in the 20th century, for example, was the abolition of the death penalty, which disproportionately affected the African American population in the United States. Fueled by the international *Black Lives Matter* protests, over the past two decades abolitionism has established itself as a comprehensive approach of critical theory and as a current of radical political practice, primarily in North America but also (to a lesser extent) internationally (Gilmore 2007; James 2000). In contemporary Europe, abolitionist politics have been especially established by self-organised refugee protests and resistances of migrants with the aim of abolishing border regimes and lagers.

These heterogeneous struggles share that they are always defined by a double movement: On the one hand, they present a (“negative”) critique of violent conditions, on the other hand, they aim at the (“positive”) development of alternatives that are supposed to make a free life materially possible (Dilts 2019). On the one hand, these theories scandalize, for example, the racist-capitalist foundation of mass incarceration (Alexander 2010) and police violence (Akbar 2020); on the other hand, these institutions are not simply to be eliminated while leaving the overall background conditions in place, but to be replaced by new institutions of social, political, and cultural participation, such as the expansion of social housing, the improvement of health care and the intensification and proliferation of democratic decision-making processes (McLeod 2019). The goal remains the successive dismantling of carceral institutions altogether (Davis 2001) and the creation of worlds beyond racial capitalism and worlds otherwise.

Abolitionists thus repeatedly emphasize that they are not only concerned with the *destruction* of previous institutions, but also with a comprehensive social-transformative strategy that includes the *construction* of new institutions as well as new socialities, relations of re-production, and socio-ecological care. Abolitionists thereby assume that precisely those groups that are particularly vulnerable to state repression and intersectionally connected forms of oppression (especially people of color, refugees, illegalized sex workers, queer, trans and non-binary folks and other socially (multiply) marginalized groups) have already found innovative models for conflict resolution, violence prevention and decision-making beyond the state. Particularly advanced in this regard is the discussion on dealing with sexualized violence, domestic violence and interpersonal violence, which is being conducted under the keywords of *transformative justice* and *community accountability* (GenerationFive 2007; CARA 2016; Dixon/Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020). Furthermore, theoretical reflections and practical experiments can also be found in relation to questions of autonomous political self-organization and decision-making in subaltern communities, in which new imaginary resources of a completely different human cohabitation emerge.

Anchored in the actual lifeworlds of oppressed groups, abolitionism thus aims to construct a new world out of the ruins of the old, using an alchemy of transforming conditions of misery and suffering into resources for agency and livingness. As geographer and abolitionist theorist Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, “Abolition is not absence, it is presence.” As she elaborates, “What the

world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. So those who feel in their gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can.” (Gilmore 2018) This *Special Issue* seeks to trace the “fragments and pieces” of abolitionist futures within conditions riddled with violence. The contributions illuminate the experiences made in very heterogeneous fields and contexts and explore the question of *how to become an abolitionist* – not only in the sense of a political conviction, but also of a prefigurative practice.

Jaden Janak reconstructs the formation of a resistant community in a carceral environment that is one of the core themes of the abolitionist tradition, the prison. The experience of solidarity within and beyond prison walls has always been essential for the survival of the incarcerated. A central technique for establishing such relationships of solidarity is letter writing. As Janak reconstructs through the correspondence of black militant trans prisoner Alyssa Hope, pen-pal relationships not only simply satisfy a universal need for contact and communication, but in a stronger sense manifest forms of mutual aid that, according to Janak, has long been a central focus of radical black movements and that might provide a stable alternative to the benefits of the failing welfare state. This case study shows paradigmatically how practices that emerge out of conditions of poverty and isolation can transcend the given situation and thus anticipate and build radically different social relations.

A similar question – how do oppressed communities manage to wrestle from situations of all-encompassing violence, injustice, and unfreedom the nucleus of a fundamentally different and more liberated society – guides the contribution by *Vicki Squire*. Squire looks at the testimonies of irregularized migrants en route via the Mediterranean to Europe. In what Squire calls ‘unruly migrations’, these people not only reject and refuse the colonial militarized violence manifest in the European border regime and their murderous ‘protection’ agencies, they also imagine different models of cohabitation, belonging, and political autonomy. The explicit political claims made and desires expressed by migrants in interviews can be reconstructed in such a way that they ultimately explode the segregated and exclusionary foundations of the order of the nation state. Furthermore, the act of unruly migration itself is an implicit refusal of this order, for they desert situations that are marked by conditions of ‘organized abandonment’ (Gilmore). This has important implications for how to criticize the exclusionary effects of the nation state: rather than by claims to hospitality (or ‘integration’), abolitionist critique is based on mobile solidarities.

The creation of alternative forms of safety, and thereby of worlds otherwise, also lies at the center of *Jin Haritaworn’s* article. Against the background of the current political conjuncture of pandemic and mass protests, Haritaworn engages with the experiences and perspectives of black, migrant and activists of color on the basis of interviews and discusses the necropolitical dimensions of COVID policies. Focusing on the political and media debates on the vaccination campaigns in so called ‘hotspots’, the tabooization of the high number of migrant COVID patients in intensive care units as well as the prohibition of the commemoration of the victims brutally murdered in Hanau, Haritaworn shows how necropolitical and racist capitalist state reg-

ulations produce migrants as ‘risks’. Inspired by the alternative genealogies of care and safety put in practice by self-organised queer, trans, black, migrant, of color and disability justice movements, practices of safety during queer, anti-racist protests and mutual aid networks in the pandemic conjuncture, Haritaworn shows how these movements not only resist necropolitical logics of security, but *transform* safety and thereby create new social relations and visions. Through what Haritaworn calls ‘transformation of safety’, abolitionist visions of safety are not only imagined, but moreover lived in the pre-sence.

Also engaging with the prefigurative potential of abolitionist practices and socialities and how they unfold in protests and revolutions, *Mathijs van de Sande*’s article turns to the crucial question of violence in abolitionist politics. Van de Sande argues that abolitionist projects, notwithstanding their various differences with regard to geographic, cultural and also political articulations, share a specific political grammar and practice of prefiguration. Whether violence is rejected or understood as a means of self-defence in prefigurative politics, van de Sande argues that both of these positions rely on an instrumentalist understanding of violence in order to achieve a particular end. The article discusses various positions on the relation between prefiguration and violence. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s work and attending to transformative justice politics, van de Sande invites us to reimagine the relation between prefiguration and violence. Rather than advocating for or against violence, van de Sande argues that violence is a social given which must be constantly re-negotiated in prefiguration as an open-ended process.

Continuing this line of inquiry, this special issue concludes with a philosophical reflection on the possibility of non-violent political action by *Christoph Menke*. Can the abolition of violence itself be non-violent? And if not, does this not render the desire to abolish violence self-contradictory? By way of a close reading of Benjamin’s essay ‘Critique of Violence’, Menke argues that every political action that deserves its name must be considered violent, for it significantly intervenes into established ethical life. Nonetheless, Menke argues, this does not lead to a paradox, as Benjamin offers still another option: a violence “of a different kind”. The crucial distinction is thus not between violence and non-violence, but between different kinds of violence. Against the violence of the law and the state stands another form of violence: one that liberates us in that it forces us to become something and somebody else than we already are. The act of self-transformation, Menke argues, always involves an infringement or a violation of our naturalized self. But rather than rejecting such force by reference to non-violence, we should embrace the abolition of our ‘given’ identity along with the abolition of ‘law, order and form’ as our liberation.

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