Seeds of Change: Dialogues on Decolonial Abolitionism

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ABSTRACT

Amid the intensifying intertwining of criminal justice and migration control in the Nordic region (Aas, 2014), this article seeks to reanimate abolitionist conversations from within. Framed as a curated dialogue, we reflect on our relationships to abolition as activists, academics, writers, facilitators, and implicated subjects (Rothberg, 2019). Guided by the spirit of the djobbeur (Glissant, 1997), we come into coalition to deepen our understanding of abolition as an analytical framework and an organizing strategy. Our conversations move iteratively through three interlinked themes: Nordic exceptionalism, carceral feminism, and penal humanism, as we examine how justice is imagined and practiced in the Nordic context and beyond. Tapping into the possibilities of the otherwise, we explore alternatives to the punitive logics of the modern/colonial world, grounded in a vision of decolonial abolitionism. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of situating the Nordic within global entanglements; challenging exceptionalist narratives and affirming abolition as a continuous struggle grounded in connection and interdependence.

KEY WORDS

ABOLITION, NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM, PENAL HUMANISM, THE AFTERLIFE OF SLAVERY, CARCERAL FEMINISM

COMING TO AND DOING ABOLITION

The political shift toward penal excess has been a central topic in both academic and public debates globally for decades (Balvig, 2005; Fonseca, 2018; Garland, 2012). In the Nordics, scholars have highlighted the complex entanglement of care and punishment within public institutions (Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). As Barker (2017) notes, welfare and penal systems "work in tandem" (p. 28), which results in more restricted access to welfare for migrants and their descendants. Meanwhile, as Aas' (2014) concept "bordered penalty" describes, legal institutions are increasingly used to deport migrants and their descendants. This aligns with Pratt's (2008) prediction that increasing punitiveness in the Nordic region is shaped by anxieties over national identity and social cohesion. Informed by this intensification of penal logics, there is a resurgence of interest in penal abolitionism and restorative and transformative justice practices (Davis et al. , 2022). In this article, we seek to contribute to the resurgence by staging a dialogue on abolition between three authors based in Denmark and Sweden. While abolitionist thought had significant traction in the Nordic region during the 1960s and 1970s (Mathiesen, 2014/1986), Nordic voices have been notably absent from the vibrant global conversation on abolition over the past decade. Rejoining these discussions is crucial, especially given how Nordic prisons are often internationally portrayed as models of "humane" incarceration (Humphreys, 2023). These representations both obscure the violence embedded within Nordic carceral systems and are mobilized to legitimize incarceration. Thinking abolition from the Nordic context calls for critical engagement with myths of "humane punishment" and the structures that uphold them—necessary steps toward addressing harm without carceral systems. While earlier abolitionist literature emphasized class (see, e.g., Mathiesen, 2014/1986; 2006/1990), race was largely absent. Though, often framed as peripheral to colonialism, the Nordic countries participated in and profited from the global structures established through the *longue durée* of colonialism, and they continue to benefit from its enduring afterlives (Lauesen, 2021). As such, it is necessary to address the increasingly differentiated governance within the region, structured through notions of citizen and noncitizen, "Western" and "non-Western" (Groglopo & Suárez-Krabbe, 2023). Abolition is thus not solely about dismantling prisons, but also global structures of domination that generate social harm and frame prisons as the necessary solution. The decolonial abolition we envision demands an understanding of the Nordic context as deeply entangled in global systems of extraction and violence.

We first met in spring 2024 at a seminar at Solidaria Center, an autonomous space in Stockholm, where activists from across Europe gathered to exchange ideas. We attended representing our respective collectives: Saleh and Lina from *Kollektivet Jordens Fördömda*, a writing and popular education collective, and Merethe from *Restore CPH*, a network engaging with conflict processes, community accountability, and collective self-determination. We quickly discovered a shared commitment to abolitionism and a desire to exchange analyses, strategies, and experiences. We found common ground in understanding abolition as a praxis that not only recognizes harm-producing relationships, practices, and institutions, but also shifts how we move through the world. As bell hooks (2014/1994) describes her relationship to theory, we, too came to abolition as we were hurting, in search of a location for healing or perhaps even more so, in search of how to move through life in meaningful and generative ways. After the seminar, our conversations moved online. We spaced our meetings intentionally with pauses, allowing ideas from one conversation to mature before we gathered again, like planting seeds in soil. Drawing from our experiences, we sought to illuminate the interplay between the local-global and historical-contemporary, while highlighting how carceral structures interconnect. To this end, we turned to creolization as a method, invoking the figure of the *djobbeur* (Glissant, 1997)—a creole word referring to someone without a fixed profession or set task, who, due to the marginalized economy of the Caribbean, navigates the world by discerning what is available and what needs to be done. Ac-

cording to Glissant (1997), creolization is a process through which diverse cultures, histories, and forms of knowledge meet, intertwine, and give rise to a relational understanding of reality. As Parvulescu and Boatcă (2023) observe, creolization "weav[es] the experiences of former colonies, imperial peripheries, and racialized populations into the analysis of both historical and contemporary processes" (p. 127). In contrast to the tendency in Eurocentric epistemologies to work through isolation, linearity, and disciplinary purity, creolization centers entanglement, interdependence, and the irreducible complexity of relation. Thus, for us, as activists and thinkers, entangled collective thinking and continuous dialogue are indispensable. The ethos of the *djobbeur* reminds us to mobilize all the resources we have, to think across histories and geographies, and welcome all to join the struggle with accountability. To be an abolitionist is, in many ways, to embody the spirit of the *djobbeur*. Guided by the *djobbeur*, we engaged with each of our particularities. In our first conversation, we shared our personal journeys into abolition and unpacked myths of Nordic exceptionalism (Jensen & Loftsdóttir, 2022). The second conversation centered on carceral feminism and the use of prison in both revolutionary and social justice struggles, and its limitations. In the final session, Saleh and Merethe explored penal humanism's relationship to the penal welfare state, questioning the humanism underpinning systems designed to control and contain, which Lina offers post-reflections on.

NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM: NOT SO MUCH AN EXCEPTION AS A DISGUISE

Lina: Ideas around "Nordic exceptionalism" really shaped my upbringing. I was born in Stockholm to Muslim immigrant parents. My childhood was marked by what anti-racists in Sweden call "tacksamhetsskuld", an indebted gratitude. Because Swedish society was "the most just and generous in the world", I owed assimilation to its structures in return. Implicitly, I also learned that any failure to assimilate was my own fault. Unlearning this is a long, still ongoing process. I moved to the U.S. at almost 18 and witnessed the Black Lives Matter movement reshape discourses around justice. Over time, I and many others became increasingly more abolitionist. Derecka Purnell (2022) outlines this collective shift well: as we all witnessed campaign after campaign for law reforms failing to protect hundreds of Trayvon Martins every year, it became clear that racism cannot be outlawed, as our world is predicated on it. The answer had to be abolition.

I also started asking new questions, like: what stake do the Nordics have in colonialism? I found that without the exploitation of racialized people, wealth would not have been accumulated here. This happens both through an uneven distribution of resources globally (Lauesen, 2021) and domestically through, amongst other things, a segmented labor market where racialized people dominate low-wage jobs with poor working conditions (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2023). Thus, we are no exception in the Nordics, and also complicit in the racist world order that abolitionists wish to abolish. What about you, Merethe?

Merethe: My path to abolitionism started with an early reckoning of how the justice system—and punishment more broadly—would not offer a meaningful reckoning to the harm I had experienced. Later, working with SAVN [En. MISS], an NGO supporting incarcerated people's relatives, exposed me to the ripple effects of punishment. My political engagement grew in grassroots activism against border regimes and asylum prisons and shaped my understanding of the threads that bind various systems of oppression together. Today, I'm most excited by prefigurative politics; working relationally to build a world where conflict can be a space for personal and collective transformation.

Living in a so-called welfare state—more accurately, a penal welfare state—deeply shapes how we relate to state institutions. We are socialized to trust the state as a collaborative partner, even as it differentiates between us, through its presence in everyday institutions like kindergartens, hospitals, and eldercare

(Gärtner & Prado, 2016). While I absolutely value aspects of this system, it has also contributed to a highly individualized society, displacing care from communities and weakening relational capacities. This dependency not only deepens our reliance on the state for care and problem-solving, but also weakens our ability to critique the harm it produces, thereby sustaining the myth of Nordic exceptionalism. When the state is seen as the default caretaker, it becomes harder to imagine responses to harm beyond institutional frameworks. Yet, the welfare system is largely compensatory: rather than preventing harm systemically, it addresses it when it's already occurred (Thygesen & Brønsted, 2023). Challenging the idea that the Nordic countries stand apart from the global punitive turn is a vital abolitionist task. While there are material differences in incarceration rates and conditions, these should not obscure the fact that punitive logics are still deeply entrenched. Nordic exceptionalism risks concealing this reality, making critical engagement all the more urgent. What has been your journey, Saleh?

Saleh: My critical thinking, shaped especially by Black studies and decolonial thought, is inseparably woven into the experience of being a refugee and living in exile. Yet, for a long time, I overlooked the prison's central role in a world shaped by colonialism and capitalism. As Wael Hallaq (2018) argues, colonialism is not only a project of domination but a totalizing system that seeks to transform all aspects of life. This is evident in the colonial organization of space. Frantz Fanon (2022/1961) describes the colonial city as violently divided: one zone for colonizers, another for the colonized, divided by barracks and police stations. The prison is a crucial site that maintains the colonial order—a third zone where bodies resisting or disrupting colonial structures are forcibly confined. Thus, the prison is not merely punitive; it is a constitutive element of the modern/colonial way of ordering space. In the context of Palestine, the establishment of a settler-colonial state necessitates the creation of spaces of abjection—most notably refugee camps and prisons. These spaces are emblematic of what Achille Mbembe (2019) calls "death-worlds," zones inhabited by "living dead." The Zionist prison, as political prisoner Walid Daqqa (2010) teaches us, is also a site of experimentation aimed at "searing consciousness" and producing subjects conditioned to accept their abject position.

Understanding the colonial ordering of space on a global scale is essential to critically examining the dynamics of the Nordic countries and their welfare states. Victor L. Shammas (2024) argues, that Nordic social democracy operates by creating a "cupola"—a dome-like structure that shields the majority within. However, this protective dome cannot sustain itself without relying on a "global hinterland" of racialized labor, cheap goods, and natural resources. While projecting an image of self-sufficiency, benevolence, and egalitarianism, this order is fundamentally upheld by a worldwide system of exploitation and domination (Lauesen, 2021). Thus, the egalitarianism enjoyed by the majority of insiders through the Nordic welfare model—which neoliberalism now threatens—is deeply entangled with ecological devastation and the creation of "death-worlds." In short, it depends on violence displaced elsewhere.

Lina: There are different ways to approach abolition. For some, the focus is on learning non-carceral ways of responding to violence in interpersonal relationships and social movements. Transformative justice is a popular tool for this, which Generation 5 (2007) defines as a framework that shifts responses to harm from focusing on punishing an "offender" toward addressing the root causes of violence. By understanding structural and interpersonal origins of harm and addressing the healing needs of all affected by it, we can be more effective at preventing it. Transformative justice places responsibility and accountability on a community level, recognizing that harm doesn't occur in isolation, but within relational contexts where bystanders also hold some responsibility to intervene and prevent. In my experience, this can be essential work in Sweden as many of us don't participate in community life outside family or close friend groups, so we have few opportunities to develop the skills and resources needed for abolition.

However, an abolitionist critique of these community-based, non-punitive responses to violence also exists. Some question whether these responses are genuinely non-punitive, while others point to situations where harmed individuals do not want a non-violent or non-carceral accountability process. Usually, when this argument is invoked, the person who has acted harmfully is framed as an oppressor, and thus as representative of violent structures. Drawing from the first abolitionists who fought slavery with violence, they call upon this legacy and make no claim of working to undo carcerality at its core. These tensions raise essential questions for abolitionists.

Seeing these perspectives helped me understand how crucial it is to understand the different ways in which carcerality functions. In Sweden, for instance, the carceral system functions to protect the state's racist and capitalist interests (Philipson Isaac, 2024). That's different from how punitiveness operates in a community context, when desires to exact revenge against a racist or misogynist arise, for instance. While still reflecting carceral logics, the function in the latter example is retribution *against* racism or misogyny, not in favor of it, and the power differential is obviously large, comparing a community affected by racism and misogyny to the Swedish state. This complexity deepens when comparing contexts such as revolutionary Burkina Faso in the 1980s under President Thomas Sankara, where carceral systems served other purposes. So, there's a flexibility to abolition, but for me, a nuanced understanding of colonialism and imperialism is imperative to grasp the limitations and possibilities of abolitionist tools in the broader pursuit of liberation.

Merethe: What I will add to what you already are bringing is how abolition rejects the detached and simplistic approach to critique, which suggests, "Just apply *this* analysis to *this* institution, and that's all we need to understand oppression." Instead, abolitionism offers a framework deeply concerned with relationality, connection, intersection, and the "both-ands" (Davis et al., 2022). Understanding the larger structures we are entangled in—imperialism, capitalism, colonialism—allows for exploring the strategies we can use to engage with, challenge, and dismantle them. It relates to the flexibility that you speak of, Lina, and I think it pushes us to form coalitions, to see how struggles overlap and are inherently linked.

Within this layered and complex framework, I often reflect on how we can recognize the shifts we are part of. For now, I find that the impact of engagement is most tangible at the local level. I try to stay attuned to how the small reverberates within the broader, how transformation unfolds in the interplay between intimate moments and structural change. I've also found guidance in the work of Liat Ben-Moshe's concept of abolition as a *dis-epistemology* (2018), to better embrace this uncertainty. It demands humility and a willingness to act without full clarity; to fumble, to revise, and to stay open to reimagining. The question *"What is the right strategy?"* often sparks intense debate within social movements. But perhaps, as you suggest, Lina, the answer lies in embracing many strategies, acknowledging that we can never fully know how our engagements will reverberate into the future. We need those committed to interpersonal and community work of care and transformation, those who steadfastly refuse violence, and those carrying the long-term torch for structural change. And history reminds us—such as with the abolition of enslavement—that some moments have also called for violent uprising. Abolition urges us to explore, collectively, the multiple paths we can take.

Saleh: I've been reflecting on the term abolition itself. As you both noted, it originates in the struggle to abolish racial slavery. The term is generative, pushing us to rethink history, temporality, responsibility, and politics. To speak of abolition is to acknowledge that slavery isn't truly over. We live in its "afterlife" (Hartman, 2022). Slavery and colonialism are not merely past events but infrastructures of the modern/colonial world. Infrastructure is not static; it requires constant renovation and reconstruction. Similarly, the racial mechanisms of exploitation, dominance, and dehumanization persist, sometimes in disguise, sometimes brutally unchanged, as seen in Gaza. The

Palestinian catastrophe, *al-Nakba*, is not confined to 1948 but unfolds daily as a living structure, demanding reckoning and resistance, as Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2022) illustrates.

Whether we theorize the relationship between the enslaved and the Black through "temporal entanglement" (Hartman, 2022) or argue, as Frank B. Wilderson (2010) does, that Blackness is paradigmatically synonymous with enslavement, one point remains clear: the Black cannot assume the position of the *free sovereign subject*. Nor should we aspire to it. As Fred Moten argues, abolition also demands dismantling freedom and sovereignty, given how deeply intertwined they are with slavery and colonialism (interviewed in El-Hadi, 2018).

Only by *refusing what was refused* to us from the outset, can we listen to those who have been relegated to zones of "social death"—or, as Moten (2013) prefers, "political death". Blackness, even under conditions of enslavement, persisted as a communal experience. Dispossessed of everything, what remained was a terrible nothingness connecting those who shared that dispossession. This shared nothingness paved new ways of being together: the seeds of abolition and the embryo of a world beyond this one. To be abolitionist is to remain with the dispossessed, to hear nothingness whisper, and to embrace the creolized and impure. Drawing on Moten's engagement with Glissant, it means to "consent not to be a single being" (interviewed in El-Hadi, 2018), refusing the normative ideals of liberal subjectivity and the sovereign possessive individual. It is the cry we've shouted in the streets for almost two years: *We are all Palestinians.*

Lina: I really appreciate what you're both saying. Thinking through abolition challenges us to recognize that we're not out of this yet, and that those who were never meant to survive are still resisting. It reminds us, that we're part of the same ongoing project, just at a different point in the timeline. In a future where true freedom becomes possible, people might look back at today's "Black of the world" (Mbembe, 2020) and see us as still enslaved. What you said, Merethe, makes me think that this is about building power. If we're serious about moving toward liberation, we need to tap into the broad set of skills and tools we collectively have, understanding their most effective uses. I'm also thinking about agency. Colonialism's fixedness removes agency, making us immovable, and what looks like progress may not truly be it. It's difficult to envision a way out.

Merethe: As you spoke, Saleh, I thought about the subject positions imposed by the carceral system: victim versus perpetrator. Our lived experiences are far more complex, encompassing multiple, overlapping subject positions with various implications (Rothberg, 2019). I think your reflections and the concept of "creolizing" highlight the generative creativity that arises when we transgress rigid divides. I think back to Sarah Schulman's (2016) critique of how harm is both overstated and understated in the Global North. The genocide in Palestine, at times reduced to a mere "conflict," is a harrowing example of understatement. Overstatement involves the use of dramatic language where, for instance, a disagreement is labeled as abuse. This may stem from a fear that one's experience will not be taken seriously unless it fits a clear-cut narrative of harm. One way to resist this tendency is to listen to, and take seriously the smaller frictions and harms, to reduce the perceived need for inflated language. In sharing, resistance may mean loosening our hold on fixed subject positions and exploring how our impact might still be heard. Wrestling with over- and understatement also brings us into contact with Nordic myths of innocence and exceptionalism. What becomes possible when we reject both personal and national fantasies of purity? Letting go of the illusion of safety that these terms provide opens space to more deeply engage with responsibility, healing, and repair.

CARCERAL FEMINISM & WHAT IF WE PUT THE PRISON IN THE HANDS OF 'THE GOOD PEOPLE'?

Saleh: Let me begin outside the Nordic "cupola" to

confront a contradiction at the heart of many movements seeking to change the world. The "post-colonial moment" offers a telling example: newly independent states inherited colonial infrastructures; borders, legal systems, carceral logics, and security apparatuses. This complicates liberation projects. Though the reasons for incarceration shifted, its function endured: preserving the (post-colonial) state by neutralizing bodies marked as threats to the order. Even Sankara's Burkina Faso used prisons to contain perceived counter-revolutionaries, such as middle-class teachers. Despite vastly different political aims, the prison persisted as a mechanism for maintaining the colonial spatial order and, fundamentally, the state itself. This tension is evident in how carceral feminism assumes that prisons can effectively address gender-based violence. Such faith in incarceration reveals how deeply entrenched the logic of punishment remains, along with the colonial ordering of space. The challenge is to unlearn these inherited structures and imagine justice beyond carcerality and the state.

Merethe: Yes, a core issue is the persistent hierarchy that appoints someone the power to punish. This structure—where individuals or governing bodies wield the power to captivate bodies and inflict pain—may target different groups at different times, which, of course, reflects different intentions and changes the effect of incarceration. Yet, the underlying logic of penal systems persists. Your point, Saleh, also brought to mind the origins of the Danish prison system, initially administered by the military and directly tied to imperial enterprises, including forced labor and the production of military supplies (Heinsen, 2016). This connection is critical, as it adds to the arguments of abolitionists like Angela Davis (2011), showing how the prison system in a U.S. context perpetuates the logic of enslavement. In Denmark, as historian Johan Heinsen's (2016) work illustrates, the penal system was part of the imperial project and (trans)national enslavement from the outset. This suggests that, at least from a Nordic context, the prison should also be considered an institution that enabled and extended such structures and logics.

Lina: True, but I also think it's important to recognize that the function of the prison can differ by context. An imperial-colonial state and a repressive society are not the same. Take Sankara's socialist revolution: imprisonment was used to manage counter-revolutionary forces. Obviously, not a perfect solution, but rather the measure available in a highly volatile situation—one in which powerful external actors sought to undermine the revolution by exploiting existing internal divisions within Burkina Faso. The revolution was under pressure from imperial forces exploiting internal divisions. So, while prisons played a role, the analysis must account for historical differences.

Saleh: While there are radical differences, the inheritance of coloniality meant marginalizing indigenous ways of addressing harm. In Eritrea, before colonial rule, my ancestors lived in communities where harm was resolved through ways that prioritized restoration and reconciliation. Incarceration is now the fundamental state logic. "Decolonization" brought sovereignty but entrenched the structures of control. Similarly, within the Nordic region, while of course a nuanced story, the former prison-free society of Kalaallit Nunaat has now become a country where punishment is a dominant part of their way of handling harm, contrasting former practices which defied isolation from communities (Brinkgaard, 2017; Larsen, 1982). Decolonial abolition in a Nordic context is for me also about being curious of these former practices, understanding what is lost, and what we could relearn, including engaging with and supporting Indigenous ways of being together.

Lina: Of course, I agree with you, and I've seen conflict resolution based on restitution, responsibility, and repair in places like the camp for Tigrayan refugees that my mom worked in. In the camps, people turn to indigenous practices and traditions because the state is not all-encompassing. This holds vital lessons for us about decolonization. But I think my point about Burkina Faso is about self-criticism, as an abolitionist with ideals and radical critiques. It's easy for us to sit here and say what the "decolonial" thing to do is. We risk placing disproportionate ex-

pectations on those resisting oppression, expecting them to always choose non-punitive paths amid violent struggles.

Merethe: This discussion relates to the persistent hope that prisons offer quick fixes. Even in revolutionary moments that challenge dominant norms, there's a desire for immediate solutions, removing those deemed "the problem". I appreciate the humility you introduce, Lina. Can we stay with that while also combating one of the great myths of prison: that if "the right people" run it for "just causes", it can deliver justice? This belief fuels carceral feminism, where social movements seek justice through carceral instruments. In Denmark, the group *Lev og Lad Leve* [Live and Let Live] recently launched a national campaign encouraging queer people to report hate violence to the police. While this may increase visibility and give some a sense that their experiences are being taken seriously, it also risks reinforcing insecurity for marginalized communities. Moreover, the threat of punishment does little to prevent hate crimes in the first place.

Lina: Right, within the carceral feminist structure we live under, only some people are allowed victimhood. I witnessed this firsthand recently. We were at a bar where a Black man flirted with a White woman. When she rejected him, the owner demanded that he leave. The owner ended up violently ejecting him: first punching and pushing him inside the bar, then kicking him in the street, as the man bled. The man ended up calling the police to report the beating. The police came, but the only investigation they did was asking the woman and the bar owner whether the man had committed a crime. The woman repeatedly said no, and she was still asked if she wanted to file a police report. The man saw that the police weren't taking his complaint seriously. He told them that, and the police responded by screaming at him, speaking condescendingly, and threatening to take him by police car if he didn't leave. The man kept saying to himself: "Isn't this Sweden? Aren't the police supposed to be fair?". As Lauri, Carbin and Linander (2023) write, carceral feminist interventions interact with larger discourses around crime and punishment, which are highly racialized concepts. Black and brown men are primarily thought of as criminals, so minor mistakes—such as flirting with someone who turned out not to be interested in you—will be viewed as a reportable crime under the auspices of "protecting women", while actual violence being waged against Black and brown men is ignored. What capacity for justice can a penal system have under these conditions?

Merethe: This example reminds me that, in the Nordic context, public institutions are at times conflated with being for the commons, even though they also serve to regulate, discipline, and shape citizens in line with the state's capitalist and global interests. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2022) call to build "life-affirming institutions" is central to the abolitionist project. In the Nordic context, this means recognizing that welfare and justice institutions are not inherently benign but can also produce harm, as they did for the man you witnessed. The task is to remain committed to reimagining and creating institutions that truly support collective life, care, and flourishing.

ESCAPING PENAL HUMANISM: GET OUT OF THE LUKEWARM WATER AND GET READY TO ASK FOR MORE

Merethe: It's crucial to engage with this notion that prisons can function humanely. How can the infliction of pain and punishment ever be humane? The reputation of Nordic countries as egalitarian, respectful of human rights, and even "feminist," feeds the myth of penal humanism (Lemos, 2021) and constructs the image of a "good punisher." Norway, like its neighbors, is often held up internationally as a model of humane incarceration, leveraging this status in international courts (Lohne, 2023). This idealization is double-edged. While it may inspire less punitive regimes, it also stifles deeper critiques of Nordic carceral structures and limits the imagination of abolitionist alternatives. Presenting prisons as humane legitimizes their existence, sustaining reformist projects, and what Lauren Berlant (2011) terms "cru-

el optimism"—an attachment to compromised structures that cannot truly satisfy our needs. To combat this myth, we must expose the unsolved harms even within "kinder" carceral practices: the pacification of harmed communities, the masking of systemic violence, and the disconnection from the social roots of harm. Simultaneously, we must cultivate alternatives that do not ask how to reform prisons, but how to build something entirely better.

Saleh: Listening to you, Merethe, reminds me of the deeper ties between state sovereignty, punishment, and notions of humanity. In political philosophy, police power often escapes scrutiny. Many abolitionist discussions approach it sociologically, but as Melayna Lamb (2024) shows, police power is philosophically foundational, tied to visions of the state of nature. Hobbes (2017/1651) imagined humans as naturally violent and self-interested, locked in a "war of all against all." To survive, individuals surrendered power to a sovereign who could monopolize violence and impose order. As Lamb puts it, "the state engenders order; and it is this which is the very definition of police" (2024: 45). However, violence remains intrinsic, especially projected onto racialized bodies, as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2009) notes. These bodies are seen as inherently violent, as "human-animals," as exemplified by an Israeli minister's description of Palestinians (Al Jazeera, 2023). This framing renders the abolition of police almost unimaginable. If violence is seen as "the state of nature", then policing becomes indispensable. Abolition must thus confront these deep philosophical assumptions, not just institutional structures.

Merethe: Yes, and Hobbes' framework also determines who is granted state protection. Protection is extended only to those who have entered this so-called "social contract", reinforcing a divide between protected insiders and vulnerable outsiders. Indigenous peoples, stateless persons, and migrants largely fall outside this protection. This division is visible in the carceral policies of today. In the Nordic context, non-citizens are increasingly constructed as *deportable* subjects (de Genova, 2002) and they are excluded from so-called rehabilitative efforts such as education (Madsen, 2023). Most recently, the Danish government signed an outsourcing agreement with Kosovo to rent prison space specifically for people with deportation sentences; an externalization of border control that further stratifies the prison population (Gjørding et al., 2024). Carceral practices are thus deeply entangled with migration control (The Freedom of Movement Research Collective, 2018). The Nordic penal model's reputation for humanism may obscure the reality that carceral structures are part of reinforcing racialized, colonial, and exclusionary logics.

Your reflections, Saleh, also bring to mind Adriana Cavarero's (2009) argument that vulnerability is an inescapable human condition. She suggests that this condition invites two possible responses: to care or to wound. In a way, beyond functioning as a theory of rule, Hobbes can also be seen as a response to human vulnerability, but which keeps centering violence in the pursuit of preventing violence. Yet, if we center responding to human vulnerability through care and solidarity, it opens the possibility of different societal arrangements; grounded in an ethic of interdependence, coexistence, and the sustaining of life.

Saleh: Exactly! This Hobbesian view, as you argued, Merethe, denies the relational nature of human existence and obscures sociohistorical power structures. To understand the production and distribution of violence, abstract notions of human nature are insufficient. By examining the sociohistorical and material conditions that produce violence, we can see how the Nordic welfare state–often celebrated for its "humane" penal system–is deeply embedded in exploitative global structures shaped by racial capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Rather than comparing prisons across different contexts, we should examine the structures that produce and sustain them. The central task is not to debate the relative "humanity" of "isolated" carceral systems but to critically interrogate the global systems that generate and differentiate prisons. Our efforts should focus on dismantling these structures, challenging the very world

that necessitates prisons in the first place.

Merethe: Absolutely. Life in the Nordic region has flourished, in part, through the suffocation of life elsewhere. Our states, while mitigating some inequalities, are still embedded in global structures of exploitation. I also think we are socialized to see ourselves primarily as citizens of a nation-state, and this fact limits the horizon of our solidarity. A kind of national moral exceptionalism is fostered where we learn to extend empathy and responsibility predominantly inward, rarely interrogating how, e.g., the resources that sustain our systems are entangled with the dispossession and displacement of others. Yet, as Shammas (2024) argues, the Nordic welfare-capitalist model sustains itself through global extraction of labor, materials, and value, while limiting its distributive promises to predominantly those with citizenship. Being abolitionists in the Nordics invites us to hold complexities: acknowledging that the Nordic states may partly reduce inequality internally but also perpetuate inequality. We need to develop a nuanced understanding of the structures, myths, and blind spots sustaining these systems and explore alternatives.

Lina's post reflections: Reading Saleh's and Merethe's conversation, I am reminded how penal humanism has helped Sweden sustain a sense of moral superiority. As Lundström and Hubinette (2020) explain, when race biology lost legitimacy, Sweden shifted toward "color blindness" and internalized a moral hierarchy, branding itself as "civilized," and "humane." This self-image likely helped foster penal humanist ideals, because it follows that a civilized society also should deal with its criminals in a "humane" way. As race, often coded as "culture", resurfaces in public debates, we witness a retreat from penal humanist rhetoric. Growing demands for harsher punishments, especially toward racialized groups, reflect a pervasive perception that Sweden has been too lenient and welcoming to immigrants. This signals a new phase, where penal humanism is increasingly challenged.

CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE WITH THE SPIRIT OF THE DJOBBEUR

By embracing the spirit of the *djobbeur*, we have connected diverse manifestations of carcerality across the globe, attending to the underlying logics that sustain these systems despite contextual differences. Thinking critically about Nordic exceptionalism, penal humanism, carceral feminism, and abolition in the Nordic region requires situating it within the *longue durée* of global racial capitalism. By questioning the use of carceral systems as tools of social justice, we must remain alert to what remains unchallenged—and what may be worsened. Isolating the Nordic, or relying on selective comparisons, risks reproducing Nordic exceptionalism; treating it as *an exception to*, rather than *part of,* global structures. While being a region with an expansive public welfare system working through a mix of rehabilitative and retributive justice cultures, this is not a satisfying endpoint. Therefore, we push for transformation of the Nordic penal welfare states, through visions of what might actually be life-affirming institutions that could provide us with planetary and human welfare.

In these times of rising fascism, it may feel tempting for activists and scholars to retreat into nationalist or regional struggles in a bid for protection. While understandable, this risk undermines the possibilities of transregional solidarity and hinders addressing the global structures of harm. Staying connected across differences is vital. Our iterative dialogue reflects a belief in abolition as a living, unfinished process; one responding to present urgencies while rejecting fantasies of isolated histories and geographies. It is precisely this complexity that can deepen our sense of interconnected struggle. It invites us into continuous transregional dialogue, to build coalitions, and to engage in creolizing processes of thought and action. As Glissant (1997) so beautifully says: "We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone." (p. 9). We thus end our dialogue for now with a wish for *djobbeurs* of the world to be in coalition.

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