

STILLP • INT
A MAGAZINE IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

TRANSCEND INCARCERATION

WILL ANDERSON

Abstract: In this essay, incarcerated theorist, writer, and musician Will Anderson conveys the experience of physical incarceration. They also consider the ways that Islam and the realities of transgendered experience interact with, and extend beyond, incarceration. In an era characterized by coalition-building on the one hand, and oppositional politics on the other, what social transformations are required to render abolition of police and prisons a reality?

I have taken to sitting cross-legged near the head of my bottom bunk, to read or write, or to push through the remaining coursework for my undergraduate in philosophy. It isn't exactly comfortable, and the lighting is never exactly right, but the circular stainless steel seat that swivels out from under the desk along the opposite wall is decidedly less so. Sometimes, after they lock us in for the night, I push my back against a foam pillow to cushion the metal frame and wait for the ache in my aging joints to settle and dull and let the flickering light of the television flutter me to sleep.

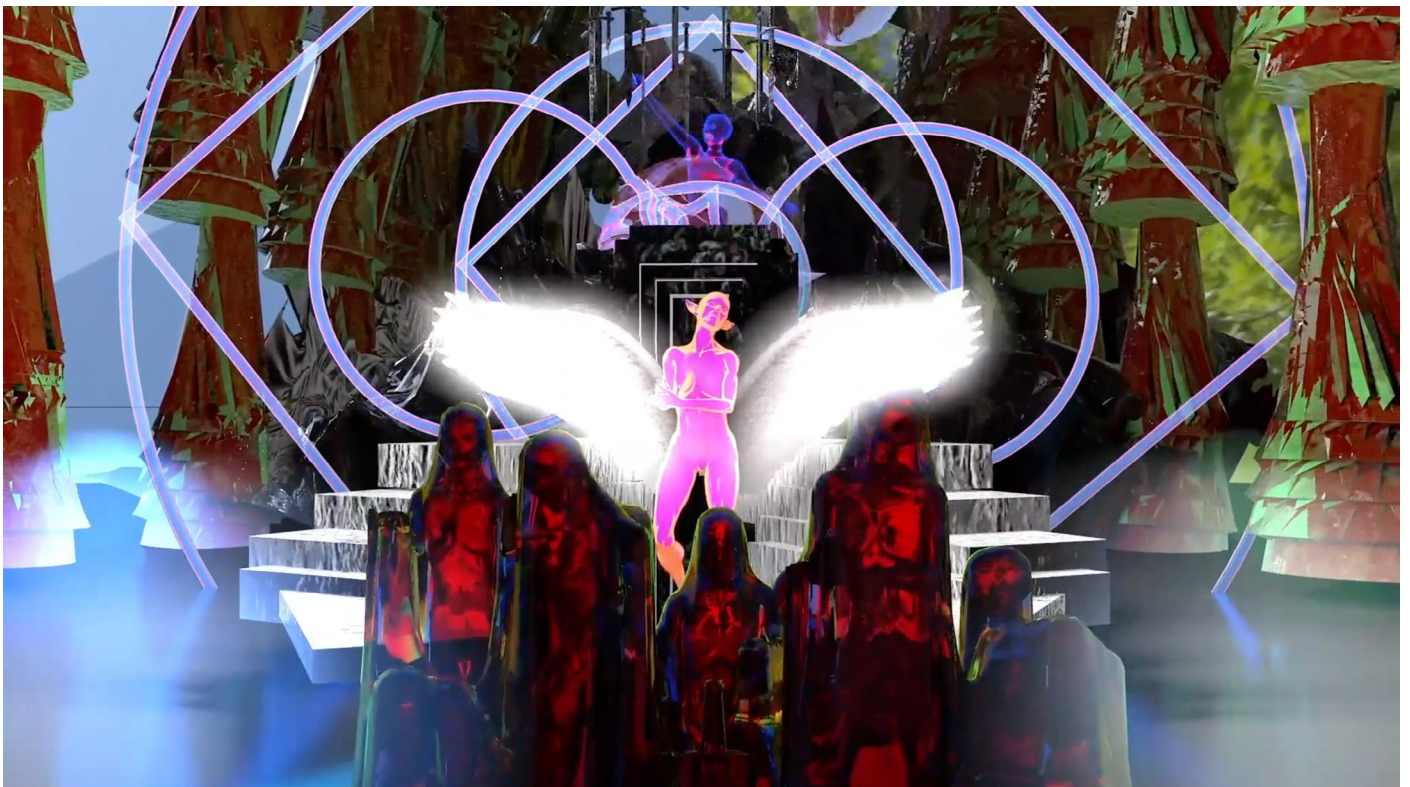
Last night, I watched an installment of the Muhammad Ali documentary by Ken Burns on PBS. Featured were his struggles with the United States over whether he ought to honor his draft status and go to Vietnam, and how his religious instruction by the Nation of Islam fueled his ideology of conscientious objection toward the war. I have loved Ali since I first witnessed the Spike Lee joint *When We Were Kings*, far too young to ever have seen him box. What captured last night's thoughts was the testimony of those around Ali at the time who unanimously spoke to his willingness to go to prison, or even die, rather than betray his conviction.

I converted to Islam in November of 2012, near the beginning of my incarceration, due in large part to my philosophical understanding of Islam. The words Islam (literally to mean "submission to the Will of Allah") and Muslim (literally to mean "one who submits") take on specific meanings depending on how one perceives the forces of nature or cosmology that are decidedly beyond our control—or, perhaps, the forces of culture and the society into which one is born. "Submission" should not translate to an attitude of resignation, but rather into an experience of recognition of one's purpose and place among those forces decidedly beyond one's control. I have always understood the practice of a "good" Muslim to begin with an awareness of, and proper relationship with, all such forces. It is only within this relationship that one can consciously engage and choose how to live in response—response being, perhaps, the only thing over which one truly has any meaningful control. To submit is to embrace the challenge of life in service of, and participation with, something greater than oneself. Submission is the freedom to face injustice, unencumbered by confusion of purpose or place, simply because injustice is wrong.

A lesson that grounds me, among my notions of faith, is the Islamic concept that we are all born without sin, in a natural state of Islam. That is, we arrive here free of the inexorable consequence of simply existing in

this world, in a harmony as yet uncomplicated by the mistakes of others or ourselves. It is to this state we all strive to return. Because of this beginning, regardless of our current condition or state of mind, we are all essentially Muslim whether we know it yet or not.

In this striving, Ali found himself at odds with the indignity of the US federal government. He had previously been determined ineligible for the draft, but, eventually, he was *seen* as in harmony with the gifts of his Black body and the opportunities his striving produced. He could be *seen* in pursuit of wisdom for the sake of itself, and for the benefit of his community. It was only after he could be *seen* that they conspired to reclassify and come for him. His whole life was open before him when he was confronted by precisely those forces to which we must *never* submit. No less inexorable for their human architecture, there are some forces we are morally obligated to face and strive to alter for their injustice alone.



Arbitrary Names Can't Define Such Taste (still) - Ben Dawson

To be incarcerated by the state is to be drafted into just such a striving against forces of injustice. It does not matter what you may have done, or even whether you did anything at all. More importantly, it does not matter whether your incarceration is physical. We are still marching a generational bridge from the explicit, official criminalization of race, gender, and queer identities, into the subsequent covert, systemic consequences that persist. The militarization of Black and Brown communities persists, ostensibly to police the very narcotics the federal government themselves introduced—historically through illicit transport, currently in the service of pharmaceutical capitalism. And while marriage equality mainstreams certain classes of queer folk, the average life expectancy for a Black transgender woman, in America, is thirty-five years. All of these and more frustrate our Sisyphean effort to disentangle the seemingly insurmountable legacy of mass incarceration and the Prison Industrial Complex from the oppressive social condition of the permanent underclass these systems create for the families, friends, communities, and societies of any person who is or has ever been incarcerated. If you need help with the math, this means everyone. If you need help with the “everyone,” this means *you*.

I was born ostensibly white. I say *ostensibly* because the pigment of my skin has granted me privilege—which I try to leverage toward justice and reform for my incarcerated cohort. However, to explicitly identify with whiteness is to embrace a racist, classist fiction written by those in power to exploit ready misperception for their nefarious ends. You might think me unwise to reject a covenant of race in a carceral

environment structured around racial divisions, where my safety purportedly depends on just such an alleged “solidarity,” but the Prison Industrial Complex depends on precisely this sort of confusion to ensure we remain at odds with one another, distracted from simple truths that will ultimately dismantle the system by exposing the vulnerable flaws in its design. To lean into the protections of whiteness is to embrace this design by the powerful to keep literally everyone else under their boot heels and at each other’s throats.

Acknowledged as a social construct, science has long-since debunked the notion of genetic difference by race, while affirming the hereditary affliction of poverty and environmental hazards. That is to say that while they cannot prove inferiority by nature, they can still curse our children of color by poisoning their physical and social environment, ensuring their safety is at risk before they are even conceived. They are the progenitors of the very inferiority against which their racist claims of superiority are made.

Non-whiteness in the United States was a part of the establishment of the category “white” as it enshrined, protected, and consolidated power. Those racialized as non-white were rendered subject, or *other*. To be fully conscious of this history and still identify as “white” is to embrace participation in this violent and cynical engineering of our society. The fact that a white person even has the option to reject hegemony and identify as simply human is a massive privilege. White people get to choose the cultural conflicts with which to engage, whereas to be racialized as anything else is to be drafted into conflict by virtue of the color of your skin. And while race is an enduring evil of our culture, it’s not the only one.

I was born ostensibly male. I say *ostensibly*, because while my assigned sex at birth has granted me privilege, I have come to appreciate how the fact of my actual (trans)gender in a misogynist, anti-queer society is almost certainly what has led me, inexorably, here. I began life as a subject of the state: I was given up for adoption as an infant, paid for and raised by cisgendered, straight, white, Christian, middle-class, suburban parents. Improperly gendered, I was emotionally confused and inconsolably unhappy. This made me vulnerable to sexual exploitation by older boys and girls from age ten to seventeen, when my ego built a conformist persona in defense and shut down my emotional vulnerability altogether.

My first trip to jail was at age twelve when I took a swing at my mom and my dad called the cops. I spent the night in a cell, in the dark, in isolation, with no idea what would happen to me. The next morning I went to court by myself, where the judge made sure I was sorry before he sent me back on probation, so the state could continue to monitor me. I could give you the trajectory of my lifelong incarceration crescendo, but for now I’ll simply mention that it arrests in young adulthood, when I better learned how to hide. I remained (ostensibly) free for more than a decade, until the unconscious burden of a life in self-denial put too much pressure on the facade, and I began to let my queer self slip.

I have spent the better part of the past decade of my incarcerated life striving to understand my identity in ways that unify my sense of belonging, presuming that whatever comprised the clockwork of my being could find no such place in wider society. It was around my reading of *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* that brought into sharp relief how to be transgender is the crime.

Like race, gender is another category constructed by a selected ideal beneath which all others are subject. To be assigned male is to enjoy the default setting. If to be assigned female is to suffer discrimination and wage inequality, suffer the persistent threat of sexual violence and assault, suffer increased risk of intimate partner violence and homicide, all as members of a subjected class; where does that place transgender persons, regardless of where they find themselves amid the always fluid definitions of gender?

Growing up, I didn’t understand what it meant that I was transgender. The language didn’t yet exist. The Latin prefix “trans-” means, literally, “across; on the other side; beyond.” It could never have occurred to me to consider, let alone argue, that I wasn’t “a boy.” Especially since I definitely wasn’t “a girl.” So, I kept my mouth shut and my emergent queer sexuality repressed in deep stealth. Growing up in a white, male vacuum of privilege, I ever belonged, but never understood the reasons why. I had attributed my cultural self-ignorance to my insular upbringing, and my criminal history to individual choices and circumstance. It took the tireless activism and sacrifice of *others* to deliver the language of community to my incarcerated concrete doorstep. Once I learned this language and where to look, I discovered the structure of the inhumanity that is designed to separate and protect those with power from those without. The worst part of

this structure is how it has conditioned us to deny our true selves. And because we are cut off from our true selves, we are necessarily cut off from each *other*. Our communities starve because we are engineered to believe that we do not exist.

I am not oblivious to the difference in kind between the historical struggle for racial equity in this country and the struggle for transgender rights. To say nothing of the founding atrocity of Indigenous genocide, or the perpetual othering of all things feminist. I keep delving into our respective histories and observe, from inside this prison, a blooming intersectional nexus. How each of us speaks our own dialect, but the indigenous language of *other* is a language of the oppressed. I am trying to walk us along the gravel, tines, spikes, and rail of this particular train of thought, hoping we arrive at this station with a shared awareness of *others* of race, gender, class, poverty, mental health; the list is endless. We were always meant to either conform, hide, end up in prison, or die—often desperately suffering the first three, only to face death anyway, broken and alone. This system was engineered as such, and this system is functioning as intended.

Prisons, jails, mental hospitals, juvenile detention, group homes, and a dysfunctional foster care system; at their worst, even our schools. All institutions of incarceration function as a warehouse for societal failure, social inequity, for those perceived as “undesirable” to normative comfortability. We live beyond a sluice gate they only ever open to wedge more of us in here—while the allegedly successful implementation of correctional policy perpetuates a revolving door of recidivism via economic sterility, poor educational programming, and the untreated trauma of incarceration itself.

Unfortunately, “prison abolition” faces a semantic problem, similar to “defund the police.” “Defund” may translate into resources sending a psychiatric professional to respond to a mental health crisis instead of an armed uniform with a cage in their car, but the message that some receive leads them to fear anarchy in the streets and the burning of the Third Precinct. My contribution to movements toward prison abolition has never suggested we set fire to the joint and cut everybody loose. There are a lot of people here who still need our help before they’re ready to get back out there and try again.

I’ve tutored grown men in Adult Basic Education classes who can barely read. And there are people struggling with mental health issues who are “criminal” enough for prison where resources are painfully limited, but aren’t “criminal” enough for a hospital facility where they could at least receive treatment. We are all conditioned to some measure of violence in society. There are some here so inured to violence as a first order response that their inability to function in an incarcerated environment prevents them from participation in the limited programs that are on offer. They couldn’t accept help, even if it were readily available. They simply are not yet capable. It is irrational to believe that exacerbation of suffering by simply transitionally warehousing people does anything but make these problems worse.

These “worst” cases represent social problems that manifest in individual consequences. As a society, we ought to be reckoning with failures in order to find and test workable solutions. Instead, this line between the category of necessary concern for public safety, and the category of subject classes formed and repressed to ensure normative comfort, becomes blurred, forming a single vast category of perceived threat.

A close friend, with whom I was incarcerated, observed that most people don’t know anything about what it means to be imprisoned. To them it’s just an abstraction, “a place where ‘bad people’ go.” To only understand prison in these terms fails to comprehend subject formation as antecedent to the restrictions placed on subjects by the state that inevitably lead to incarceration. Because it is the role of any state to enact regulation over society, regulation, in itself, is not controversial. Where regulation begets injustice is where it creates distinction, and then favors or protects one class at the expense of the other. Or, and this is essential to understanding prisons today in this country, when confronted with its failure to treat persons equally, the state fails to take necessary action to resolve the inequity for which it bears responsibility.

[w]hite people, white men in particular, being of a class against which subject classes are formed, experience regulation of their lives the way most people experience prisons—as an abstraction. That is, because regulation exists to protect the status quo of their privilege, to them, regulation is invisible.

Similarly, the affluent class fully appreciates the role regulation plays in protection of their commercial success and means of control over society. Except that this society has grown from a reprehensible, genocidal moral heritage. To be an *other* is not an abstraction. To be an *other* is to concretely exist as the very subject of regulation (see: criminalization) by the state—a state with a single de facto response in their subjection toolbox: incarceration.

So, what do we talk about when we talk about “abolition”? As an activist for social justice and the universal equity of human rights, I spend a lot of time considering the root causes of inequality in US society. As a transgender nonconforming incarcerated person, I necessarily spend a lot more time contending with the result. I worry about what happens to any of us if we simply shut it down for the sake of a proverbial “win.” If activists fail to take the long view of a world without prison, there would likely be an overwhelming backlash.

From my incarcerated, activist vantage point, downstream from the inertia of social justice movements, it feels as though the momentum of events following the murder of George Floyd have paused to take a breath. Recognition of shared goals has allowed us to trade notes and learn to speak each other’s language, to learn how the subjection of lives and communities may be dismantled. However, much like Ali—proud of his gifts, unapologetic for his Blackness—an uprising commands visibility. To be visible is to be *seen*, and not just by allies. In addition to the PIC and explicitly racist and/or fascist groups working against change, there are individuals and institutions who benefit from subjection who may have done so unconsciously. Anyone previously unprepared to acknowledge injustice and their part in it is now wrestling with whether or where they belong. Now that they can see us, how will they respond?

In the meantime, it will not matter what defines you as an *other*. According to the carceral state, by virtue of your existence, they have fashioned you a cage whether you know it yet or not. That trigger twitching in your chest while you consider this unfortunate truth is the right guidance of your conviction demanding action from the rest of your body to face those things we are obligated to face and alter for their injustice alone.

Is it possible then, to move across, to the other side of, and beyond incarceration?

First, there is the ability to control one’s own narrative. For example, it matters that I was able to compose this personal essay while incarcerated, and that *Stillpoint* exists as a platform to disseminate these ideas. But it also matters that I had to compose this essay on a seven inch, manufactured-for-prison, touch screen tablet. Each letter tapped out without word processing, sending dozens of messages back and forth, paying with digital “stamps” for each one. Then spending hours in editorial conversations, over phone calls that charge by the minute, because regulation of my communication prevents access to regular email formats or shared documents. Incarcerated speech is ostensibly free, but regulated, and for a profit. Without tacit permission and outside assistance, incarcerated voices go unheard. And I must always be mindful, not just of what I say, but how I say it.

Sharing narrative experiences cultivates a shared narrative experience, forming coalitions of *others* that become communities. Communities that may, through an ethos of inclusion, paradoxically transcend subject boundaries altogether. The lack of awareness of subject formation and subject classes prevents differing communities from agreement on the present condition, let alone on a problematic history and what should be done.

Second, there is the role incarceration plays in support of subjection. It wouldn’t be enough to close facilities outright, reallocating resources to more cost-effective solutions. Prisons, as designed, serve a purpose for the collective psyche of this nation as well. In addition to providing a physical boundary between safe and unsafe, prison walls delineate inclusion in functional society. It is the place where “bad people” go, after all.

Under the current construction, subject formation creates classes of others defined by race, gender, sexuality, et al. The privileged classes leverage exclusion to enjoy power, money, even something so basic as an identity of belonging, for themselves. In order to maintain this hierarchy of privilege, subject classes have to be removed to somewhere. Incarceration affirms this process by way of criminal records and

registration, all but guaranteeing permanent underclass and exclusion. Without incarceration to provide this function, society will have to rely on other means to deal with unresolved issues of inequity, prejudice, and genocide.

This brings us to a question of integration. Without a warehouse in which to repress the collective identity crisis, such a narrative may serve to educate and engage society and help allow lasting dissonance over injustice to be resolved. This allows for conscious acknowledgment of every person of every class and encourages their full participation in society, for the fact of their humanity alone. Such an ethos would necessarily come full circle to eventually include the persons who still believe they rely on the current disparity for their advantage. A society that doesn't need to protect an othering elite certainly has no use for structural cages, physical or otherwise.

The work is as complex as disentangling a legacy of hatred and violence from the root system of an intractable society, but that work may begin as simply as learning a handful of new meanings for the words we use to describe people. The shared language of the oppressed may then evolve to become a national language, across cultures, in which the new narrative is told and passed along over the next generational bridge, where it can exploit this intersectional nexus in order to strive for an actualized society of justice and equity.

Will Anderson – Feb '22
Minnesota Correctional Facility – Faribault

Muhammad Ali. Directed by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, PBS, 2021.

Stanley, Eric A., and Nat Smith, editors. *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. AK Press, 2010.

Will Anderson (they/them) is Muslim, transgender/nonconforming, an artist, and an activist, currently incarcerated in Faribault, MN. They welcome any and all engagements of personal, professional, academic, and critical value, capable of withstanding the inherent restrictions of imprisonment. To get in touch visit their page [here](#).

Ben Dawson (he/him) is a queer artist based in east London, working between digital and physical spaces. Dawson's work explores the complex symbiosis and divergence between our physical and digital selves through moving image and video installation. Dawson's work is speculative and opens questions up to never be answered, just ruminated on.

Arbitrary Names Can't Define Such Taste is shown here is as a still of the full work shown in *Stillpoint Magazine*.

© Copyright for all texts published in *Stillpoint Magazine* are held by the authors thereof, and for all visual artworks by the visual artists thereof, effective from the year of publication. *Stillpoint Magazine* holds copyright to all additional images, branding, design and supplementary texts across stillpointmag.org as well as in additional social media profiles, digital platforms and print materials. All rights reserved.