Theories and Methodologies

Boethian Abolition

SEETA CHAGANTI

This essay triangulates three areas of focus: "rethinking exceptionalism," a premodern European philosopher, and the abolition of modern police and prisons as instruments of racial capitalism. Readers might themselves formulate justifications for the various juxtapositional permutations. To some, American policing provides a study in this country's exceptionalism (Hirschfield 1111–12). To others, American exceptionalism and universalism inform the interaction between domestic policing and international violence (Singh 56–61; Schrader 28–29). And whether policing registers exceptionalism as self-perception within an American sphere or elucidates that exceptionalism's relation to the international formation of oppressive systems, premodernity plays a role in the global development of racial capitalism (C. Robinson 32–57; Kao 548), which is inextricable from carceral power. These historical and geopolitical narratives offer numerous ways to link exceptionalism, premodernity, and policing.

I, however, triangulate these terms through a different method, one informed by a commitment to the abolition of the prison industrial complex (PIC), which exists symbiotically with police. First, I argue that the approach to time and causality in Boethius's sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy* can support abolitionist objectives to dismantle modern American policing and carceral systems. To liberal sensibilities, the outlines of the PIC appear known and thus inevitable and permanent (Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 1). An abolitionist perspective as supported by Boethian thought recognizes that the carceral system's sequences of determinative causality are suspect. And the knowledge that our understanding of cause and determination is flawed, a Boethian framework affirms, creates an obligation to seek a different horizon, even if—or especially because—we cannot see it. In this way Boethius joins the work to move us toward a

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world without prisons or police. Second, I devise a method that queries exceptionalist approaches not by reaching directly backward to posit a longer temporal continuum, or outward toward a larger geographic space of inquiry, but across time and space into a premodern setting with divergent conceptions of time itself.

While Americanist studies of exceptionalism often expand the arena of inquiry—internationally and through postcolonial, diasporic, and comparative studies (Greene 6; Watson 417; Kammen 19–24)—the analysis and critique of exceptionalism simultaneously depend on the language of time. One example is the proposal that because Americans have not always had a sense of what America is, it becomes difficult to outline a historical narrative of developing exceptionalism (Hodgson 2). Alternatively, typology offers a different kind of temporal means to understand American identity (Bercovitch 93). In addition, the mythology of America as "redeemer nation" (Madsen 16) implies a self-perception through relation to futurity. Exceptionalism also correlates "ideology, myth, and history" as time-related terminology (Duquette 473). The disciplinary praxes of American studies developed in contrast to cultural studies, where American studies asked the narrower question "What is American?" (Denning 360); exceptionalism can involve an American relation to its own present instead of an engagement with other theoretical questions about the meaning of culture. It also involves a deferred future: the Great Awakening sustains American national identity through the concept of a "*perpetual frontier*" (Spanos 40). Furthermore, theorizing exceptionality in American literary studies recognizes the central and future-oriented role of lineage. As an important contributor to American ideology formation, the jeremiad espouses a "commitment from one generation to the next" (Bercovitch 6–7). Temporality emerges as deferral or inheritance in these contexts.

Observing this methodological dependence on time, I draw on a temporal model that originates in a historical past outside the ambit of American studies. As challenges to hegemonic structures, alternative and insurgent uses of time and chronology are methodologically familiar, whether through Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism (Coulthard 151–52), queer dissidence (Freeman 171), or the critique of racial capitalism (Kelley xvi–xviii). But engaging a more extreme past reveals still other insights. Articulated through a language of temporal experience, Boethius's late antique philosophical framework acknowledges both the limitations of our perceptions of structures and systems and the hopeful possibilities that might lie in not knowing—yet always seeking to know—what could lie beyond them. If American determinist theologians like Jonathan Edwards established a suspicion of Boethius (Kane 69), the early medieval Boethius's reintroduction into Americanist discourse might unsettle the social status quo that the trajectories of American political and intellectual history have undergirded.

In proposing to dismantle or reimagine medieval studies as it exists (Rambaran-Olm et al. 357–58), medievalists devise ways to respond to the problem of the "master's tools" (Lorde 95; Rajabzadeh 4): we cannot simply wedge hegemonic discourse—often white and Christian—into the kinds of social justice projects that originate from the insurgent traditions of those most affected by institutional oppression and not from sites of power. That problem exists here, for while Boethius was a prisoner executed for political reasons (and questions criminal justice systems [bk. 4, prosa 4, secs. 27–42]), his social position (Matthews 15) hardly groups him with those contributing most significantly to emancipatory movements like abolition. He—and the protocols of his study—exist inside the "structures" to which Audre Lorde alludes. Medieval studies respond to this dilemma by, for instance, compelling the similarly positioned Geoffrey Chaucer to "yield toward that vision of justice demanded by his daughters," in the words of Samantha Katz Seal and Nicole Sidhu (229). Here, Seal and Sidhu introduce a journal issue that communicates activist aims by suggesting that readings of Chaucer can enable the conscription of legal and institutional instruments into "continuing activism" "without replicating" institutional power (Lipton 336, 350–51).

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An abolitionist perspective, however, does not align with these institutionally based strategies and thus must seek other methods to approach premodern archives. One possibility might involve identifying evidence of medieval subversion within domination; indeed, early responses to the *Consolation* perceived the rebellious potential of its quest for knowledge (Discenza 31–32). Alongside this endeavor, it is important to consider how historically bound narrative might limit the kinds of political possibilities that Dylan Rodríguez, responding to Michel Foucault, discerns by looking beyond periodization and "traditional disciplinary knowledge forms and methodologies" (*White Reconstruction* 20). Demonstrating such experimental methodology, Luke A. Fidler argues that while medieval societies do not themselves offer an abolitionist "model" for the future, analyzing premodern artistic images of punishment and captivity can nevertheless contribute to modern abolitionist work (46). My approach introduces into modernity a premodern habit of thought to encourage in modernity the abolition of carceral and criminal justice institutions—not their reform (Chazelle 23–25) or instrumentalization—as the way to free everyone from their power. While an ostensibly Christian philosopher might appear a strange site from which to mount an anti-institutional strategy, Boethian thought suggests its availability to moral, political, and cultural realms beyond early Christianity. It maintains, for instance, a complicated relation to Christian spiritual frameworks (Shanzer, "Interpreting" 240–44). Henry Chadwick notes, "Although [Boethius] is a Christian, he wants to argue for providence exclusively on grounds of natural reason, deliberately setting aside any appeal to religious authority either in Christ or in the text of Scripture" (xv). Danuta Shanzer sees the issue as less *whether* Boethius was Christian than *why* his writing sustains its multifaceted relation to Christianity and the Bible, noting his interest in "knowledge and Wisdom" rather than a particular "religious narrative" ("*Haec*" 61, 73n98). Boethius and the history of his reception reflect a commitment to philosophical frameworks and to exploring the application of principles of logic to religious questions; as John Marenbon puts it, Boethius "clearly wished to contribute to the debate, though less perhaps by the view he stated, than by the manner in which he put it forward" ("Boethius" 15). In addition, Boethian thought might be seen to consider what is not sensorily available to us as a metaphysics. This is not to say that abolitionist praxis would benefit from espousing principles of highest good or cosmological order. But it is to suggest that Boethius, a late antique prisoner reorganizing ancient thought, offers something liberatory to us. The premodern recognition of the flawed character of worldly inevitability and consequence—a habituation to a divergent conception of time—supports a future achievement of an abolitionist horizon against the limits of liberalism and liberal humanism.

Boethian Thought

The Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius's last text before his execution, consists of a prosimetric dialogue between Boethius and his vision of Lady Philosophy, who appears to him in prison to teach him that what he experiences as misfortune is simply the manifestation of an ever-changing Fortune, who inevitably distresses mortals because they lack access to a divine providential perspective that transcends time. The interlocutors explore divine knowledge and free will through time and anteriority. How, they ask, do we understand inevitability or contingency in time within the larger encompassing system of a divine providential perspective that foreknows all? How can we preserve the possibility of an individual's independent human agency within what seem to be the constraints of divine knowledge? How do we perceive the temporal sequences of causation in this framework? The medieval reception of Boethius teaches trust in the providential workings of a system or nature not fully comprehensible (Fein 196). In this section I shall consider how readers of Boethius might deemphasize the liberal focus on individual will and agency to foreground instead a challenge to the inevitability that systems appear to create.

Boethius's providential terminology explains a system to whose control we see ourselves as

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subjected specifically because of our engagement in time. Philosophy tells Boethius that "Providentia namque cuncta pariter quamvis diversa quamvis infinita complectitur" ("Providence embraces together all equally, however different, however infinite"), but "fatum vero singula digerit in motum locis, formis ac temporibus distributa" ("fate directs separate things in motion, [those separate things] having been distributed in place, form, and time"; bk. 4, prosa 6, sec. 10).[1] Philosophy furthermore emphasizes that we cannot see the rationales of providence. For example, "de hoc quem tu iustissimum et aequi servantissimum putas omnia scienti providentiae diversum videtur" ("regarding the one whom you think to be the most just and the most preserving of fairness, [that one] seems to the all-knowing providence to be the opposite"; bk. 4, prosa 6, sec. 32). Here, Philosophy makes clear that the providential perspective is as encompassing as it is unattainable to human beings. Our perspective cannot pass beyond our own mortal and temporal barriers to inhabit it.

Readings of Boethius explicate the operation of free will within divine universal prescience. Robert Sharples's analysis begins with a question arising from Boethius's earlier work: How do we interpret *statements* about events in the future (211)? This question asks us to determine whether we can say statements about future events are true. If we acknowledge that problem, we must further ask whether the truth of a statement is determined by the event subsequently happening or whether that truth is determined in some other way. But more important is the nature of the *necessity* of the future event. For Sharples an "analytical necessity" is involved in defining what is true. For us to call a statement about an event happening in the future "true," that event must happen; however, this scenario does not make the event necessary in an absolute sense (210). This formulation regarding necessity might seem to accommodate free will; however, it leaves the problem that foreknowledge itself—the ability to know truth in the future—limits the possibility of free will (218). Boethius responds by proposing that God's providential perspective exists in an eternal present. God, in other words, does not situate Himself outside time; rather, to Him all time (including the future) functions the way the present does to us epistemologically; He "knows all things *as if* they were happening in the present" (Marenbon, "Divine Prescience" 18). God's eternity is "neither reducible to time nor incompatible with the reality of time" (Stump and Kretzmann 434). If God knows the future as we know the present, He has access to knowledge of what we would understand as the future (but He does not perceive it that way). While we might see something as necessary to happen because God foreknows it in what we understand as our future, providential knowledge does not function this way in relation to time. An act in human future is not necessary just because, in human terms, it is foreknown. Those terms of futurity are not God's. In this way, free will exists. One's acts are not attached to an absolute necessity of one's making those choices just because, in human senses of futurity, God knows them. In this account, shared by other Boethian scholars as well, Boethius asks us to recognize that we could think beyond the time we understand to question our perceptions of inevitability.

Modern interpretations of Boethius—literary and philosophical—focus on free will in ways that resonate with the liberal humanist primacy of individual agency. For example, formal and stylistic properties of this text encourage a sense of personal identification: "The *Consolation*'s reader should find himself or herself in the prisoner" (Lerer xvi). This identification becomes protreptic in the project of ethical teaching (Johnson 9). One potential warrant of such insights is that the Boethian text implicitly values the position of the individual, in this case the ability to see or find oneself, even as therapeutic process (Donato 427). In the verse sections (*metra*) of the *Consolation*, for instance, appears an association between teleology and Boethius's "remembrance of himself" (Astell 45).

When placed in the context of Boethius's own classical influences, such self-recognition reveals itself as more than a look inward or means to create sympathy with another individual. Boethius's *metra* in books 3 and 4 reflect a Neoplatonic "emphasis on the idea of self-knowledge, the turning-in upon itself

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of the soul." But the Neoplatonic context equally implies an aim "to arrive at a clear perception of truth" that reaches outside the self toward the good by regaining access to the soul's memory of human knowledge (Crabbe 258). Again, this is not to suggest that Boethius teaches us that activists should be Neoplatonists or idealists, but rather to offer another set of terms by which to remind ourselves of alternatives to the individualized empathy and connection that the liberal framework naturalizes. Philosophical critiques of Boethius for his conception of God in relation to time construe the problem of this God as lacking "personhood" (Zagzebski); "If God had thus fixed his intentions 'from all eternity,' he would be a very lifeless thing, not a person who reacts to men with sympathy or anger" (Swinburne 221). But perhaps such critiques impose liberal perspectives on a mode of thought that lies in suggestive orthogonality to the priority of selfhood.

In other words, is it required that Boethius primarily fortify liberal humanist values, or that responses to him be understood to perform that function? This text's "delayed emergence" even in medieval Europe means it lacks contemporary readings (Cornelius 270). We have thus subsequently overlaid various "multicolored lenses of reception" on Boethius's work across time (Shanzer, "Interpreting" 228); one such lens might be modern political and moral liberalism itself. When we treat the *Consolation*'s exploration of free will as its most central concern, are we responding to a longer history's investment in these values and their influence on interpretive practice? What would alternatives to reading Boethius as engaged with a liberal humanist framework look like? In what follows, I deemphasize free will in Boethius so that system, inevitability, and the temporality of the future in the *Consolation* become important for their own sake—as do causation and necessity (Kane 69)—and not simply as impediments to free will.

Even as he acknowledges that we cannot discern fully the providential perspective, Boethius urges us to contemplate the nature of that divine knowledge. Book 5, prosa 6 begins with a series of invitations: "intueamur nunc quantum fas est, quis sit divinae substantiae status, ut quaenam etiam scientia eius sit possimus agnoscere. . . . Quid sit igitur aeternitas consideremus; haec enim nobis naturam pariter divinam scientiamque patefacit" ("let us consider now, as much as it is permitted, what is the nature of the divine substance so that we can also recognize what kind of knowledge is His. . . . Let us therefore consider what eternity is; this indeed makes open to us equally divine nature and knowledge"; bk. 5, prosa 6, secs. 1, 3). The text encourages a shift from confirming free will toward a different recognition: not only that the unknowability of the system's temporality and being renders actions as though inevitable, but also that the nature of that unknowability is important—even liberatory—enough to issue a hortatory prompt to explore. As the text notes, "Humanas vero animas liberiores quidem esse necesse est cum se in mentis divinae speculatione conservant" ("but indeed it is necessary that human souls be more free when they preserve themselves in contemplation of the divine mind"; bk. 5, prosa 2, sec. 8).

That contemplation makes evident that the impossibility of fully discerning the divine system creates the appearance of inevitability in time. Time, in human experience, can be "sense-perceptible" (Johnson 134). Book 5 considers this relation of inevitability to the inaccessibility of the system's full perception:

> Atqui deus ea futura quae ex arbitrii libertate proveniunt praesentia contuetur; haec igitur ad intuitum relata divinum necessaria fiunt per condicionem divinae notionis; per se vero considerata ab absoluta naturae suae libertate non desinunt. Fient igitur procul dubio cuncta quae futura deus esse praenoscit, sed eorum quaedam de libero proficiscuntur arbitrio; quae quamvis eveniant exsistendo tamen naturam propriam non amittunt, qua prius quam fierent non evenire potuissent. Quid igitur refert non esse necessaria, cum propter divinae scientiae condicionem modis omnibus necessitatis instar eveniet? Hoc scilicet quod ea quae paulo ante proposui, sol oriens et gradiens homo, quae dum fiunt non fieri non possunt, eorum tamen unum prius quoque quam fieret necesse erat existere, alterum vero minime. . . . Haud igitur iniuria diximus haec si ad

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> divinam notitiam referantur necessaria, si per se considerentur necessitatis esse nexibus absoluta, sicuti omne quod sensibus patet si ad rationem referas universale est, si ad se ipsa respicias singulare.
>
> (bk. 5, prosa 6, secs. 31–34, 36)

> But God looks upon these future things that occur because of the freedom of the will as the present; therefore, related to divine perception, they become necessary through the condition of divine knowledge, but considered for themselves do not make an end of the absolute freedom of their nature. Therefore all those things that God foreknows will come to be in the future, far from doubt, but certain of them proceed from free will, which although they come to be, nevertheless in happening do not lose their proper nature, by which, before they happened, could have not happened. What therefore does it matter that they are not necessary, since on account of the condition of divine knowledge it will turn out in all ways the likeness of necessity? To wit, [it matters] somewhat as those things I proposed before, the rising sun and the walking man. While those things occur, they cannot not occur; nevertheless, one of them, even before it occurred, was necessary to happen, but the other not at all. . . . So therefore we did not speak wrongly that these, if related to the divine knowledge, are necessary, if considered for themselves, are free from the bonds of necessity; just as everything that is open to the senses, if you relate it to the reason, is universal, if you look at it by itself, is singular.

The "condition of divine knowledge" makes everything appear to operate to us as necessary or inevitable. And even though he draws the distinction between what is necessary and not, when Boethius notes "it will turn out [*eveniet*] in all respects the image or likeness [*instar*] of necessity," his language emphasizes this perception of inevitability. The verb of motion *venio* embedded in *evenio* focuses Boethius's remark on human experience as existing within time and motion; the perception of necessity originates in the distinction between that human position and the stillness of Providence (bk. 5, prosa 6, sec. 33). The archaic indeclinable noun *instar*, meanwhile, not only signifies "appearance, likeness, figure" but also appears in Virgil to designate an apparition (Puhvel 292). Pseudo-Aquinas pauses to gloss this term as "ad similitudinem" (Evenson 79). While *instar* in one sense emphasizes a quality of appearance that exists in opposition to a substance or the reality not accessible to us, in another its associations with weight, balance, and value (Puhvel 291), as well as its nominal status, emphasize grammatically the being of appearance itself, and specifically in this case the fact or human temporal experience of apparent necessity, in its relation to the inaccessibility of full discernment.

Within a framework that both acknowledges the perception of inevitability or "necessity" and challenges these through structural and temporal means, distinctions between causation and determination (themselves understood as temporal sequences) emerge as crucial. While medieval authors responding to Boethius focus on the determinisms that discussions of free will invoke (Slayton 70), Boethian thought also foregrounds the distinction between determination and causality. Breaking down the role of cause in addressing the problem of theological fatalism, Jonathan Evans identifies cruxes of temporal sequence as well as bringing-into-being. But identifying causal sequence does not in itself equate to solving problems of divine knowledge and determination (170–73). Particularly if we shift our focus away from the protection of individual free will, Boethius creates space to consider the mechanism of causation as distinct from determination; "What troubles most persons about causal determinism is not causation per se but the wider notion of closedness of the future relative to the past" (Kane 73–74). Misprisions of causal sequence's relation to determination occur at the level of human will and perception, not at the level of the providential structure, where human time and sequentiality do not signify (bk. 5, prosa 1, secs. 13–19; bk. 5, prosa 2, secs. 1–7).

Analyzing the relation of determination and cause is in some ways an enterprise of historical study; while acknowledging this fact's relevance, I want to preserve Boethius's contemplation of a futurity generatively unknown. Matthew Giancarlo argues that Boethian philosophy in *Troilus and Criseyde* points not toward determinist fatalism but toward history as a potentially blinding, rather

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than revealing, force (251–52). Responding to Fredric Jameson, Giancarlo identifies "the overdetermined apparatuses of history and culture" as an entwinement of over- and undercausation (264). In the next section I move toward an abolitionist future—perhaps articulated akin to Jameson's "projects of transformation" (81)—by distinguishing determination from cause within divergent models of time.

Abolitionist Thought

According to a Boethian framework, the carceral system appears inevitable and permanent to those who look only as far as the parameters they can discern, parameters dictated by notions of free will. This section builds on that critique to argue that the Boethian separation of cause and determination rebuts the liberal outlook that renders criminality and carcerality mutually inevitable. In this rebuttal, Boethian time might lend different shape to abolitionist goals. Studies of American carcerality consider not only sentencing time but also the role of prison "labor-time" (Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 17–18); they additionally examine art (Fleetwood 39–42; Story), geography (Moran 309–10), and literary history (Smith 14) to posit various kinds of carceral time. I do not formulate such carceral time myself, but I hope to recognize those temporal experiences by introducing premodern temporal models as methods by which to explore abolitionist aims.

The Boethian-derived distinction between causality and determination destabilizes the layered edifice of carceral inevitability in time. To advocate for the abolition of prisons and police is to contest their temporality as permanent: "the liberal assumption that either the carceral state or carceral power is an inevitable and permanent feature of the social formation" (Rodríguez, "Abolition" 1577). Liberalism construes in this inevitability a necessary link between police and the pursuits of those with individual liberty (Neocleous 36). The Boethian lens helps us to parse the components of these constructs by revealing how temporality informs misperceptions of determination and cause. For underlying the assumption of a permanent carceral state is a misconceived temporal sequence of determination shared across liberal and conservative ideologies of crime and consequence: people act wrongly and then must be punished and deterred from further bad action, protecting the innocent and their interests by means of carceral techniques (Hall et al. 169). And while the liberal position recognizes systemic forces in this dynamic, the sequence of crime and punishment still devolves to the individual: "the structure's fault but the individual's responsibility" (Murakawa 77). The attachment to this sequence is also attributable to the reflection of the state's "retributive impulses" in our personal responses (Davis, *Freedom* 124). That attachment leaves little room to acknowledge other material motivations (Gilmore 95–96). It occludes the more expansive ways of thinking about causality to which Boethius asks us to attune ourselves.

Boethian thought excavates other layers of this repressive dynamic by framing them also as structures of permanence and sequential determination. The anti-Black position that sees criminality as a "pathological outcome" of racism wields influence on liberalism (Murakawa 76). This assumption, expressed in the temporalized discourse of "outcome," envisions Black criminality as an inevitability that reflects and intensifies the inevitability characterizing the carceral system itself. The Boethian distinction between cause and determination suggests an important counteraction here: what in fact causes what we define as criminal outcome (Kaba 3)? The Boethian model suggests that to understand those causalities is to recognize how they diverge from the racist determinations to which carceral power and process seem inexorably to lead. For the *Consolation* creates space to acknowledge a possibility of freedom beyond inevitability, different outcomes that do not reflect the determinism of carcerality. The authors of *Policing the Crisis* (1978) note that in formations around law, order, and social vulnerability, "there are psychologistic, reformist, and deterministic *variants* in the liberal ideology about crime" (Hall et al. 170). As a diagnosis of outcome shaped by a temporal process of social forces, determination thus plays a central role in "common-sense" rationalizations of

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policing and carcerality in the face of crime. But Boethius's text reminds us that while the weave of temporality, cause, and determination will always appear tight to us, we have an obligation to unravel and thus see beyond it to the possibility of different structures of causal mechanism that might free us from the assumptions of determination.

Returning to our opening theme of American exceptionalism might rein in the potential abstraction of such determinism: in a highly specific sense, American exceptionalism as related to carceral power emerges as the application of deterministic momentum. The brief allusion to *Policing the Crisis* above paves the way for a somewhat expanded look at this text, which bears out the relation of exceptionalism and the determination of carcerality. *Policing the Crisis* could interact suggestively with Boethian thought at a number of levels, from its exploration of the phenomenon of mugging to its broader attunement to the particularities of national character. And its pursuit of what is specifically British (304–05) helps refine our sense of American exceptionalism.

First, in its reading of the phenomenon identified in the early 1970s as "mugging," *Policing the Crisis* identifies not only the diminishing space of sequential consequence but also anticipatory or presumptive progression with no acknowledgment of the knower's position, another problematic dynamic in the Boethian framework (bk. 5, prosa 4, secs. 15–19). The British 1970s anti-immigrant preoccupation with American "mugging" has proleptic force: "*the idea of American mugging*" becomes a description of a general situation *before* it refers to any specific crime in England (Hall et al. 21–24). Not only is actual incidence outstripped by fear, this anticipation also produces a perception of "*potential* victims" (20). That anteriority creates obvious dangers for those assumed to be potential perpetrators. In a sense, the account of 1970s mugging in England might seem to negate aspects of American exceptionalism, given certain correspondences between *Policing the Crisis*'s narrative and the 2021 American media and political strategy of encouraging panic over supposed "crime waves" to undo gains made in 2020 anti-police actions. But this parallel might oversimplify the matter, and, in any event, I find myself more interested in how ideas of exceptionalism contribute to and gain force from temporal structures that premodern thought can elucidate. Specifically, whether considering carceral violence synchronically, in terms of an embedded causal retributive sequence in any given instance, or diachronically, in terms of a developing history of a criminal idiom across America and England, we see the role of ideological assumptions about time and cause in carcerality.

Second, in the larger cultural exploration of *Policing the Crisis*, the emblems of American exceptionalism manifest themselves as assertions of deterministic power, articulated in terms of time and instrumentalized in the service of enforcing carceral regimes beyond the United States. Everything from newspaper headlines asking, "Must Harlem Come to Birmingham?" (273) to Ford-style management (271) to a 1968 article intoning that "[w]e might as well begin to learn the lessons of America now" (25) to a vindictive letter opining that "in America the mob would surround the jail and lynch" an accused "half cast" perpetrator (134, 133) to the authors' analysis of "the designation of British events as *incipiently* 'American' in character" (26) suggests the image of America itself as a limiting sphere. As the object of an English glance into the future, America codes as inevitable the narrow endpoint of sequences that—like Britain's particular immigration history—have in fact stood as distinct in certain ways. *Policing the Crisis* points out that carceral regimes and idioms like mugging were not the only influential American imports of this period. Mobilizations of dissent within England also looked, for example, to the American Black Panthers (387) as well as to a recent past of other Black American liberation movements and rebellions (356–57), some of which reflected an international consciousness (386). But a mainstream exceptionalizing of America through a narrow and negative sense of "Harlem," through mugging, through (global) practices of capitalist enforcement performs the liberal and conservative work of preserving a racist and classist status quo even elsewhere. Instead of limiting those elements to the United States, the English strategy of labeling them

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as American while also sustaining the possibility of their occurrence on English soil fortifies the mechanism by which a sequence leading from the manufactured perception of crime to the violent and limited horizon of actual greater toughness on crime determines the future. While *Policing the Crisis* identifies certain "strong" English tendencies, like empiricism and anti-intellectualism (152), as participating in these dynamics, it reveals additionally that England's seeing America's distinctness as a future or fate effectively curtails the possible scopes of causality and makes them appear as what must already have been determined. A liberatory analysis drawing on cause, time, and futurity, however, can oppose this reinforcement of the carceral state.

For if Boethian thought casts into relief repressive ideologies as sequential temporalities that conflate cause and determination, we can deploy its critique of such temporality in the service of abolitionist projects. Idris Robinson proposes that the "abolitionist overcoming of whiteness implies a fracturing of the family, since taking up the cause of black liberation tends to correspond with forsaking the lineage of whiteness." If Boethius asks us to acknowledge that our very senses of sequence, progression, and inevitability create a flawed and incomplete understanding of what time and causality mean, he potentially offers one language to express emancipatory possibilities against the special—and especially destructive—determined sequences of white lineage and heirship. In the Boethian view, we must look not just inward but also upward (Pavlinich 650) to recognize that we are wrong about what appears inevitable and, relatedly, wrong about what looks like causation. We are especially likely to be wrong the more deeply attached we are to a largely white liberal primacy of individual will that we defend and protect, unable and strategically unwilling to discern how the system operates. Medieval authors following Boethius remind us of his fundamental interest in futurity (Grady 242); it is toward present and future means to act against an unequal and racist status quo that the Boethian view might turn us.

The imagery of Hercules's final labor in book 4's closing *metrum* provides us with a vision of that solidarity that exists in the present and could achieve such a future.

> Ultimus caelum labor inreflexo
> Sustulit collo pretiumque rursus
> Ultimi caelum meruit laboris.
> Ite nunc, fortes, ubi celsa magni
> Ducit exempli via. Cur inertes
> Terga nudatis? Superata tellus
> Sidera donat. (bk. 4, metrum 7, lines 29–35)
>
> A last labor, with neck unbent, he held up the sky, and as his prize in return for the last labor, deserved heaven. Go now, brave ones, where the lofty path of a great example leads. Why, inactive, do you all expose [turn] your backs? Having been overcome, the earth makes a gift of stars.

Ann W. Astell argues that "inreflexo" counteracts the "re-" prefix elsewhere associated with vengeful retribution ("redimit, "rependit" [67]). "Inreflexo" might equally negate the word it contains: reflexivity. *Flecto*'s etymology connotes the single object bending toward itself, the bent rib of a ship ("Flecto"). *Inreflexo* thus opposes self-reflexive turning inward.[2] While Hercules acts alone, he is potentially oriented toward a collectivity with larger purpose. For that collective we turn to the verse's addressees, the "you" who are *fortes* (brave) but who *terga nudatis* (expose, or turn, their backs). While the *metrum* critiques them for their turned backs, it seems also to signal their potential strength through this image of their backs. Furthermore, their facelessness frustrates any impulse to perceive them as individual selves even as it presents us with their force, creating a provocative vision of solidarity. This suggestion risks appearing naive about not only the complexities of coalitional politics but also the concern expressed in a history of Marxist writing about the binary limits of individual and collective, the totalitarian dangers of "self-forgetting" (Rogan 68). At the same time, the efficacy of the image might lie in the very temporal estrangement of its source, which unsettles and reframes solidarity axes to render the turned backs a rejection of liberal empathy politics. And the detail of the one

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who has already held up the sky acknowledges those who have gone before to create the deepest forms of insurgency. Where the moral and philosophical necessity of overcoming the system to receive the gift of stars is so difficult for liberalism to discern, we might bring tools from outside exceptionally American time to tear that system down.

Notes

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1. All translations of Boethius are my own.

2. This proposition seems to counteract Boethius's idea that to approach providential perspective is to approach its still center. But the Boethian sense of concentricity itself is dynamically complicated (Zayaruznaya 194–95; Chaganti 220).

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