

**If The Creek Don't Rise:  
Collective History & Prison Abolition in the Southeast**

By :

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## ABSTRACT

This digital humanities project identifies the gaps between theory and practice in prison abolition throughout the Southeastern region of the United States. It suggests that in contrast to other areas, the history of the Southeast continues to harm those currently living in the South, through Southern legislators and deep-rooted ideology in Southern culture, but also from being bastardized by outer regions in the U.S. The historical and current criminalization of poverty and race happens all over the United States, but each region has a shared history of colonization, genocide, and enslaving people. The Civil War, a strong Christian influence, and the Reconstruction era shaped the South's mindset and perpetuated resentments between the Northeast and Southeast. The classist ideas perpetuated by the North have intensified the complications manifold. This reality obstructs those attempting to change Southern society into a more equitable place. This work enlightens the public on the collective history of the United States leading to mass incarceration, and it supports forging a new world without prisons. The digital humanities website tells the shared history and stories of the lands that prisons now sit on in the South to aid people's understanding of the past. It dismantles biases by creating a microcosm of memory culture. The work calls on those who long for prison abolition to include the South in their movements. It helps people understand why decarceration in the South is vital to ending mass incarceration. The work recommends a plan for all prison activists to support the people on the ground in the South fighting and suggests ways to achieve abolition in a larger framework.

### **If the Creek Don't Rise: Collective History & Prison Abolition in the Southeast**

Basil Soper

"If the creek don't rise" is a slang phrase predominantly used in the Southeastern United States and can translate to "if all goes well." Many people use the longer form of the expression, "Lord willing and if the creek don't rise," as a typical response when invited to places and events. Some believe that this term came from the idea that if a creek rose, there would be flooding, so one has little control over their plans. "Lord

willing and if the creek don't rise" indicates that a positive outcome depends on God's intervention or blessing. James 4:15 in the Bible is often connected to the phrase. The saying and verse share the acceptance of God's will.

However, religion was used to soften the ugly truth of the phrase. The saying demonstrates the conflation of violence, church, and state in the South. The expression's true origin speaks to the genocide and removal of the Muscogee Creek tribe, or the Creeks, in the Alabama and Georgia states of the Southeast. (Halbert and Ball) The melding of history, religion, oppression, and the politics behind the term "if the creek don't rise" are the same underlying issues and principles surrounding incarceration in the South. Understanding them could be the key to eradicating mass incarceration in the region.

### **Prison Abolition**

Angela Davis, political activist, academic, and author, writes, "This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism." (Davis, 16) Presently, the United States has 1.9 million people incarcerated (Sawyer and Wagner). Nearly half of whom are incarcerated in the Southeast. Imprisoning roughly two million Americans imposes an unreasonable financial burden on the communities of those detained, breaks up families, and leads to increased recidivism levels. While the proposal to abolish prisons is not new, it has, until recently, been featured chiefly in academic literature. Today there is growing clarity as to the motives behind the prison abolition movement, and information about prison abolition has become more accessible. For instance, in the mainstream,

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has called for prisons to be abolished; Patrisse Cullors, the co-founder of Black Lives Matter, recently released a book called *12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World: An Abolitionist's Handbook*; and major mainstream media outlets like *GQ*, *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and others have published pieces about prison abolition.

Abolishing prisons does not mean releasing unhealed people who have caused harm, without resources or support, thoughtlessly into the world. It is quite the opposite. When people are released, they should be freed into a place that offers support as soon as they get out. Abolition is based on the idea that justice should occur without prisons and among those with whom the offender has relationships. Abolition is eventually a complete end to the incarceration system, which will be replaced with a restorative justice system. Abolition requires decarceration, meaning sometimes the courts give shorter sentences, but it primarily builds alternatives to incarceration. The famous *Defund the Police* campaign is a means of decarceration. The call to defund the police demands that government moves financial resources away from heavily funded police forces to programs that could stop people from being incarcerated. Abolitionists call for help that could prevent someone from offending, like programs for mental health, economic justice, affordable housing, and not imprisoning those who cannot pay fines or fees. Abolitionists must peel away the system that upholds prisons layer by layer. Even with the significant changes occurring and a clearer understanding of what abolitionists want, it is difficult to visualize a U.S. society that does not have prisons. It is even more challenging to imagine an area like the Southeastern United States, painted as inherently biased by most of the country, to exist without prisons. This work illustrates how the United States got to a place of mass incarceration, a

foundation in white supremacy, erased history, and what the world could look like without prisons.

### **The South: Religion, the Civil War, and Carceral Economies**

In contrast to what some United States citizens may believe, the South is a very diverse region. 1 in every 3 LGBTQ people in the US lives in the Southeast. 58% of the Black community resides in the South. (Frey) Between 1990 and 2000, many Southern states registered as having the highest increase in the population of people of Central and South American descent: North Carolina (394%), Arkansas (337%), Georgia (300%), Tennessee (278%), South Carolina (211%) and Alabama (208%) (Tafoya et al.)

In Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, she succinctly breaks down prisons and their connections to enslaved people. The year 1865 brought the end of the Civil War and the establishment of the 13th Amendment to the US constitution. It also generated the United States' first mass prison upsurge. State and local leaders in the South used the criminal justice system to appease the white public's fear of formerly enslaved people and strengthen the broken economy. Across the South, Black Codes and Jim Crow laws were made legal. Ludicrous offenses like hunting on certain days, walking without a purpose, or settling on public or private land could put a Black person in prison. Incarcerated individuals were lent to private companies through a system of convict leasing that put imprisoned

folks to work on, for example, prison farms. Convict Leasing recreated and legalized slavery. (Alexander)

The Northeast also offered its own kind of Jim Crow laws. In an op-ed, Dr. Andrew W. Kahrl, who studies the history of segregation, wrote about Jim Crow in the Northeast. (Kahrl, 2018) Dr. Kahn speaks about how laws criminalizing loitering or disorderly conduct allowed for the removal of Black people from areas primarily inhabited by white people. White proprietors, concerned about their national image, realized that rules that dictated who could be in public spaces could be used to execute racial segregation in a slicker, albeit no less violent, fashion leading to prison.

Kahn says, "In the South, white officials literally drew color lines in the sands and the waters offshore. In the "racially liberal" Northeast, towns devised elaborate, and ostensibly colorblind, procedures for determining who could access public shores and what they could bring and do once inside, and then proceeded to enforce them for black and brown people only." In the 1930s, Long Branch, NJ, passed an ordinance requiring all residents to apply for a pass to allow access to only one of the town's four public beaches. Town officials claimed the rule was meant to prevent overcrowding. Without exception, though, black applicants were assigned to the same beach and were denied entry to the others." (Kahrl)

As convict leasing was expanding throughout the South, Southern class identity was attacked by Northern media outlets in mainstream media. Nancy Isenberg examines how underprivileged white people became a 'notorious race' (Isenberg, 266). She says that poor whites had 'fallen below African slaves on the scale of humanity.' (Isenberg,

263). Flagrant articles emerged in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times*, *Putnam's Magazine*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (Isenberg, 345), making a spectacle of poor people of European descent in the Southeast. From this time on, the labels "poor white trash," "redneck," and "hillbilly" were born, and the image of the dirty, inbred, toothless, and evil Southerner in front of a confederate flag was introduced. Poor whites were the unfortunate victims of class oppression while later benefitting from white privilege, and many upheld a white supremacist structure. This could be seen in minstrel shows—everything once said about poor whites was used to demonize the freed Black community. Historian Dale Cockrell told the *National Museum of African American History and Culture* that poor and working-class whites at this time felt "squeezed politically, economically, and socially from the top, but also from the bottom, invented minstrelsy" as a way of expressing the oppression that marked being members of the majority, but outside of the white norm." (Nasheed, 2019)

The states in the US suffering most from poverty are in the Southeast. (US Bureau of Labor) The top five contenders for record imprisonment rates globally are also in the US South. (US Bureau of Justice). It is also important to note that the most religious states in the United States are Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, South Carolina, West Virginia, Georgia, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah. (Lipka and Wormald). These connections are influential in explaining the relationship between racism, classism, and criminalization. It also shows an interconnectedness between the punitive ideology in much of present-day Christian philosophy and state governments not separating from the church. The point of

retracing this history is not just to argue that prisons have been a direct outgrowth of slavery but to interrogate the persistent connections between racism, classism, access to education, predominantly Christian societies, and the Southeast's isolation from the rest of the country.

During the Civil War, some white Christians, such as John Brown and many Quakers, were abolitionists of slavery; others used religion to justify slavery. Frederick Douglass disagreed with many white churches because they promoted enslaving people. In his speech, *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?* Douglass said, "Fellow citizens! I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home." (Douglass)

Christians today tend to be prison reformists. A survey conducted by the Barna Group for Prison Fellowship asked if Christian values compel them to take a stand and advocate for criminal justice reform; 74% of Americans and 81% of practicing Christians agreed. (Barna Group). Across denominational segments, Catholics and mainline Christians are more likely to advocate for justice reform (84%) than non-mainline Christians. Evangelical Christians are the ones to agree strongly. (Barna Group). Many Christians are a part of prison ministry, but the jump to imagining a justice system free of prisons is hard for them and many others to fathom. Prison, for many Christians, is seen more as a tool that brings people to God than a block between people and healing.

Melissa Schrift wrote about the prison rodeo and its history in *The Angola Prison Rodeo: Inmate Cowboys and Institutional Tourism* and gave an excellent example of the amalgamation of the church, state, and white violence. She describes the prison rodeo grounds, "the outer entrance of the prison features a US flag as well as a mammoth, inmate-painted mural of an eagle." The rodeo starts with a prayer. After the prayer, the rodeo begins with the Angola Rough Riders, incarcerated men whose primary job on the farm is to handle livestock, "each riding a horse and holding one of three flags: the US flag, the Louisiana state flag, and the Confederate flag." (Schrift) Only two Confederate flags were displayed during rodeos the author attended. She says, "at least one of the Confederate flags was always carried by a Black inmate."

This work is not to push for a call to end all southern institutions, like churches, but to re-evaluate them and ask how to move beyond retribution. Christian support of prison abolition and restorative justice would be a profound affirmation of faith as it has been in the past. Lee Griffith, author of *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition*, says that repentance is a confession of sin and accepting our powerlessness. He writes, "When we make a confession of our powerlessness, we will be enabled to respond in a much different way to questions about the alternatives to the reliance on police and courts and prisons. We will be reoriented away from seeking to concoct institutional and technical answers." (Griffith)

Prison representatives often have to convince rural communities of the so-called economic benefits that building a prison in their town could offer. (Chesney-Lind and Mauer) While private prison companies own a chunk of the prison market throughout the South, many rural sheriffs benefit financially from prison operations. Sheriffs

possess great power in the states, so they can usually build prisons without anyone challenging them. (Fernelius)

In 2017, Caddo Parish Sheriff in Louisiana, Steve Prator, protested the state's Justice Reinvestment Package, which could reduce the prison population in Louisiana by as much as 10% while cutting over \$260 million in government spending by releasing nonviolent offenders. His remarks of self-interest went viral on the internet. One specific quote shocked many people, "In addition to the bad ones ... they're releasing some good ones that we use every day to wash cars, to change the oil in the cars, to cook in the kitchen, to do all that where we save money," he went on. "Well, they're going to let them out — the ones that we use in work release programs." (Schofield)

In Kentucky, the failing economy turned to prisons as a solution. Many of them detain incarcerated people transferred from other states. The centers were presented as saviors from post-coal mining poverty consuming the area. Prisons are built and hidden away in rural areas and concurrently far away from their families. (Stine)

Many more states in the South beyond Louisiana and Kentucky have economies supported by incarceration. Prison tourism is an issue across the United States. The South has a more concentrated prison populace, and many prisons were built on plantations. Aside from the government and those who benefit from incarceration, the individuals that maintain the prison business are the people who partake in prison tourism and fund it with their tourism dollars. These people travel from all over the world to these prison theme parks. Melissa Schrift powerfully authored this response to prison tourism, "The Angola rodeo offers an opportunity for visitors to invert their

mundane reality and gawk at the underbelly of society. In this way, the rodeo draws from a rich legacy of penal spectacle in Western culture, including public executions, stockades, and parading naked criminals through the streets." (Schrift)

According to Marijana Bittner, the visit to a violence-related tourist attraction is motivated by cultural needs. Several respondents to her work stated the element that drew them to these areas of mass executions, wars, homes of the deceased, and prisons, is that they guide the culture of a nation. The visits, subjectively attached to such an experience, were fashioned out of cultural needs. It can make one feel like things were a necessary evil, and humanity has evolved. The commodification of prisons and the pain inflicted upon the incarcerated as a standard cultural feature have normalized this shameful part of society. (Bittner) Society can come to an uncomfortable realization that prisons weren't ever required for public safety or justice, and the system has not evolved. The foundations of prison exploit underserved communities and uphold white supremacy, and they still function as such. Abolition is the only solution to breaking this sadistic system.

## Method

When creating *If the Creek Don't Rise: Collective History & Prison Abolition* in the Southeast, a digital humanities website was required to tackle the subject matter efficiently. The website (<https://www.ifthecreekdontrise.com/>) incorporates history, ethnography, and activism in one place. Including the Southeast's sounds, imagery, and art draws people into a Southern experience and motivates people to connect with the region. To put a retrospective such as *If the Creek Don't Rise* onto paper would flatten its ability to stir people in an already hyper-visual world. The exhibition featured on the site can be emotionally heavy and too much to take in at once but revisited over time. Access is also an important tool when speaking about something as contentious as prison abolition. Through a website, which doesn't sit behind an academic journal paywall, it can be visited by anyone interested in learning more about abolition, prison, and the Southeast.

Eight pieces on the site offer different viewer experiences. The homepage gives meaning to the title and what one can expect when viewing the site. The "Why the South?" page provides an overview of the region's history, religious influences, and unique movement-building. The abolition resource page is devoted to secular abolitionist organizations throughout the Southeast, religious and spiritual organizations dedicated to prison abolition and reform in the area, and a media section for people wanting to engage more with prison abolition. The data portion of the site showcases a survey done by the researcher and research from other outlets. The data backs up the theory that religion, race, and poverty are intrinsically connected to high incarceration rates in the South. "The Researcher" page gives the viewer an

understanding of who built the site, collected some of the data, and why prison abolition is a personal issue to the creator. The bibliography area shows all the works that were cited.

The "Layered Histories" section of the site possesses the ethnographic and archival aspects of the work. Looking at 13 states, this feature of the work is a biographic outline of some of the Southeast's past and present carceral institutions. Schools in the United States have never satisfactorily taught the history of American slavery and the Civil War. Maureen Costello, director of Teaching Tolerance, a program at the Southern Poverty Law Center that encourages authentic and intersectional education, told the New York Times that the practice used to analyze the textbooks was about seeing how the history of enslavement was incorporated throughout a text and precisely what it teaches. "The best textbooks maybe have 20 pages, and that's in an 800-page textbook," Costello told me. "At its best, slavery is taught because we must explain the Civil War. We tend to teach it like a Southern problem and a backward economic institution. The North is industrialized; the South was locked in a backward agricultural system." (Stewart, 2019)

As a result – people lack a basic understanding of how the war shaped the country and the profound impact it continues to have on race relations and incarceration today. Southern legislators this year are attempting to erase any, although scarce, conversations about race, slavery, and LGBTQ matters in the classroom. With abolition being a more mainstream topic, it is vital to give all people, especially young people, an understanding of colonization, the civil war, and the reconstructionist era in the South, especially regarding prison reform and abolition.

The "Layered Futures" portion lays out the plan of action that could bring abolition to the South. Research on the region and history led to a 6-step method that simplifies what people can do to achieve abolition in the South.

## **The Framework**

### **1. National Campaign on the Southeast and Education in Churches / Institutions of the South**

This portion of the method towards abolition directs people to change the narrative about the South through a PR and marketing campaign. It will tell the stories and beauty of the South and those who inhabit it. The other portion is to bring a similar campaign and education into churches. Churches need to get on the side of abolition in the Southeast to change many people's views on prison.

### **2. Decarcerate:**

Decarceration is a method where advocates work to get people out of incarceration. Using data, research, and advocacy, the goal is to make the prison population smaller by closing prisons. Emphasizing focus on decarceration in areas outside of the South would leave the most vulnerable populations in the United States behind once again. This single region incarcerates half of the people in prisons today. In this section, the work offers activists ways to engage with decarceration and bring it into the Southeast. Through legislators and research in one's state, activists need to pass bills that would change rulings, sentencing, bail costs, and arrests.

### **3. End Prison Tourism:**

Using Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, the case for ending prison tourism is made. Much of today's society is a hologram that contains hyperreality: it constitutes representations of the reality that one perceives as the real itself. The hyperreal has gotten deeper through prisons, theme parks, the metaverse, fake news, smartphones, and reality TV. The virtual world has an economy with eCommerce, crypto, and NFTs. The portrayal of jails in the media and prison tourism distorts and does nothing to help people understand the realities of the incarcerated or the United States history, which is entangled with criminalizing people of color, particularly Black folks, and the poor.

### **4. Economic Justice & Reinvesting in Affordable Housing**

Incarceration spawns poverty by creating employment obstacles, reducing earnings, reducing economic security through court-appointed debt, fees, and fines, and creating a barrier between previously incarcerated people and public benefits.

#### **Solutions to gaining economic justice in the South:**

- **Raising the Minimum Wage**
- **Progressive Taxation**

A progressive tax is one where the average tax burden increases with income. (Aka, Tax the Rich)

- **Bringing dialogue around poverty and worker pay into religious circles**

When traveling to churches, highlight poverty and how it impacts people's lives in the South. Educate institutions about the disparity and ask them to support protests and legislation ending poverty.

- **Expanding Access to Trade School & Higher Education in the region**
- **Use the NLIHC Advocates Guide to Advocate for Affordable Housing**

Every year, the National Low Income Housing Coalition publishes the Advocates' Guide to Housing and Community Development Policy to educate advocates of all kinds about the programs and policies that make housing affordable to low-income people across America.

Anyone can advocate for housing programs with our members of Congress and other policymakers, and this guide directs organizers on how to.

## 5. **Youth Resources**

The history of children being used for labor and incarceration started with the first European arrivals in the 1600s. Over time, reforms were made for white children. Today, social workers are the government entities that encounter children vulnerable to incarceration and can help end child imprisonment. Most in the field are not representative of the communities they serve. (Council on Social Work Education) Social work must develop into an abolitionist structure geared toward ending state-sanctioned violence and building and affirming relationships with groups that endorse similar values. Social work must also change its practices by moving from a savior complex to camaraderie with those they serve. The profession will mutate into

an anti-capitalist, decolonized field and does not lean on the criminal justice system. The field must persistently work toward transparency and revolutionizing care for youth, or it should be abolished because it is a carceral function that doesn't minimize the impact of incarceration.

## **6. LANDBACK**

"LANDBACK is a movement that has existed for generations with a long legacy of organizing and sacrifice to get Indigenous Lands back into Indigenous hands. Currently, there are LANDBACK battles being fought across Turtle Island, to the north and the South." (LANDBACK)

Prison abolition is about ending colonial, racist, and oppressive violence inflicted upon people by the state. LANDBANK wants the same outcome. Those who care to end mass incarceration and the prison structure must support LANDBANK and include indigenous and Native people in organizing around prisons in the Southeast.

## **Conclusion**

When meditating on the layered history of prisons and the future that holds abolition, much of the paradigm shift must happen within people. Activists could take the leftist saying, "Kill the cop in your head" and make it their mantra. There doesn't seem to be any research on where the phrase originated. Nonetheless, the expression is a reminder that one is a part of the colonized white supremacist structure, and therefore its values and concepts are placed into ones thinking over time. Colonialism inflicted

predominantly by the white western world has infected much of the globe. Nobody can abolish the policing system and systemic violence until they abolish the system within. People must do the internal work and help others do the same on the road to abolition.

Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, and in the book, she discerns that nature is a rich, kind, and living entity. Using the traditional knowledge of the Potawatomi people and the instruments of botany, she writes about how all people can heal both the land and humankind by operating in a symbiotic bond with nature. Kimmerer writes, "all of our flourishing is mutual" (Kimmerer). When we take care of the world, the planet takes care of us. When we as people help others grow, we all get nurtured. We can mutually benefit one another in a system not designed for certain people to benefit from. This looks like fully addressing the origins of poverty and trauma. This looks like white Americans owning up to all whiteness and much of its current and past viciousness. This looks like Americans of European descent healing past wounds and dismantling white supremacy. The upper class and many white people tend to apply more humanity to property than human lives, depending on their identity. For example, when the police confront a group of peaceful protestors, some of the public is more upset about a Starbucks window getting smashed than the atrocity that started the protest.

America has always defined itself through its implicit and explicit embrace of racial oppression and unequal distributions of economic resources. The South is more of a collaborator than the exclusive perpetrator. If we can imagine a new world transcending the injustices of prisons, then certainly the South and its intricacies can and must be included in this future.

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