

Methodologies of
Imprisonment

An Indelible Defect

AVERY F. GORDON

FOR A LITTLE WHILE NOW, I'VE BEEN TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF CAPTIVITY AND CONFINEMENT IN FOUR OVERLAPPING but distinct models prominent today. These four are the United States' model of mass imprisonment of surplus racial and ethnic populations as a form of socioeconomic abandonment; military imprisonment, especially in the course of permanent security wars; the European model of the detention of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees ("Fortress Europe"); and the Israeli model of occupation by encirclement and immobilization. In all these forms, or zones, of captivity, the status of the worker, the enemy, the criminal, the migrant, the resident—and thus the prisoner himself or herself—is being modified and mutated in profound ways. In each, older recognizable dynamics of race and class power persist and extend in new directions. In each, the very physicality of the prison takes at the same time more extreme and more abstract concretization as isolation unit, as camp, as safe haven, as city. I've wanted to develop a conceptual and evocative vocabulary for linking the socioeconomic dynamics of accumulation, dispossession, and political power to the dialectic of social death and social life as these meet in the ontological and epistemological status of the prisoner.

In thinking about the work imprisonment does in the relation between state power and human life, I've been especially interested, to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore's terms for defining racism, in the "state-sanctioned" "fatal couplings of power and difference" that lead some groups of people to become "vulnerable" to "premature death" (28). Fate and fatality, life and death, are linked in complicated ways, and nowhere more so than in the extent to which racism explains not just who becomes a prisoner (almost everywhere and at all times poor persons of color, members of ethnic minorities, immigrants, and dissidents) but also what the prisoner becomes. Racism is not merely external to imprisonment, and prisoners are never only racial subjects, in the sense in which we commonly use that word. Imprisonment is

AVERY F. GORDON is professor of sociology and law and society at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a cohost of the weekly radio program *No Alibis*. She is currently writing about war, imprisonment, and abolition.

a medium of racialized statecraft, and prisoners are usually, and definitively in the United States, considered in law and in social practice an inferior race in and of themselves. The artifactual carving up of human differences into distinct groups whose worth is ranked hierarchically; the assignment of innate and ontological characteristics to these groups; the othering, denigration, stigmatization, and vulnerability to premature death that accompany such a ranking—in short, the state-sponsored coupling of difference and power: this regime of fate has been applied to prisoners as a class. “The captive,” Claude Meillassoux wrote in his 1975 book *L’esclavage en Afrique précoloniale*, “always appears . . . as marked by an . . . indelible defect which weighs endlessly upon his destiny” (qtd. in Patterson 38).

A Knowledge of Struggles

Today the destiny or fate of the prisoner weighs heavily on us. The prisoner’s fate is always bound up with those of us who are not yet captured, regardless of whether this relation is acknowledged. From what vantage point can the not-yet-captured scholar understand, in the interest of changing it, the prisoner’s deadly fate? To begin to address this broad theoretical and methodological question, it is necessary to gain access to subjugated knowledge, to reveal what has been hidden in the interests of the state, and to disclose the secret that the mark of the “indelible defect” is designed to veil.

“The discourse of struggle,” Michel Foucault said to Gilles Deleuze in 1972, “is not opposed to the unconscious, but to the secretive. It may not seem like much,” he continues, “but what if it turned out to be more than we expected? A whole series of misunderstandings relates to things that are ‘hidden,’ ‘repressed,’ and ‘unsaid.’ . . . It is perhaps more difficult to unearth a secret than the unconscious” (“Intellectuals” 214). Later, Foucault famously brought the secretive and the unconscious to-

gether in his definition of subjugated knowledge, which referred to, as he put it, “two things.” On the one hand, subjugated knowledge names what official knowledge represses within its own terms, institutions, and archives—it is official knowledge’s unconscious, we might say. (“I am referring to historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations. . . . blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship.”) On the other hand, subjugated knowledge also names or refers to “something else . . . quite different”: to marginalized and discredited knowledge from below and from outside the institutions of official knowledge production (“a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual . . . as insufficiently elaborated . . . naïve . . . hierarchically inferior . . . below the required level of erudition or scientificity” [*Society* 7]). These fugitive, outlaw, insurrectionary knowledges are not hidden in the institutions of official knowledge but are their disqualified secrets.

Foucault sought the collaboration and equality of these two types of subjugated knowledge on the grounds that the appearance or arising, whether welcomed or not, of “disqualified” knowledge by subjugated peoples makes advances in scholarly critique possible (8). Genealogy is the name he gives to the “coupling together of buried scholarly knowledge” and unauthorized, unrecognized knowledge in the service of “de-subjugating” or decolonizing knowledge (10). It was his great belief that this collaboration between these two types of subjugated knowledge and between their makers would provide a “knowledge of struggles” and a set of “anti-sciences” with the “strength” and the “tactics” to fight what he called the “power-effects . . . of any discourse” (8–9). Foucault’s argument for the necessity of a collaborative relation-

ship in knowledge struggles was especially misunderstood, although he was neither the first nor the last to try to carve out a place for the radical intellectual, the radical professor in particular, in social and political movements, a job whose essential requirement is a practical, that is operative, belief in the equality of the two types of subjugated knowledge. By equality, I don't mean sameness in either form or significance. By equality, I mean the distribution or redistribution of respect, authority, and the right to representability or generalizability (the right to theorize, one could say) that, among other things, entails the capacity to be something other than a local knowledge governed or interpreted by a putative superior.¹ By equality, I'm referring to the standpoint that negates the dispossessions, disabilities, and dehumanizations experienced by those deemed inhuman or subhuman and treats their knowledge as authoritative, necessary, powerful.

When It Is Utterly Impossible to Communicate

Needless to say, too many scholars have failed to occupy such an egalitarian standpoint. With prisoners, this standpoint is especially absent and troubled since, as Jared Sexton and Elizabeth Lee forcefully point out, most of what passes as critical discourse today cedes first and foremost to the legitimacy of criminalization, the rule of law, and the morality of innocence.²

To launch or participate in a discourse of struggle on this terrain requires first the confiscation of the authority to speak not only of specific prison conditions or the prison as institution but of what Dylan Rodríguez calls the United States “prison regime,” by which he means the forms of state power and statecraft that imprisonment “possesses” (43).³ “An indispensable element of American statecraft” and form of “domestic warfare,” the United States prison regime “sanctions and exercises

dominium (absolute ownership and ‘inner power’) over its human captives, a total power that does not require formal political approval or ethical consent from the ostensible polity” but that does require legitimation as a “respectable,” “commanding,” and “commonsensical” authority (44). In the “*chattel logic*” of the United States prison regime, the prisoner is “conceived as the fungible property of the state” (42) and thus cannot and is not permitted to speak for himself or herself, since, as property, he or she lacks civil integrity, is what Subcomandante Marcos calls a “Nobody” (Taibo, Ignacio, and Marcos). This obviously makes confiscating the authority to speak, much less organizing for the arrival of the “Time of Nobody” especially difficult and treacherous.⁴ The difficulty is compounded by the fact that, as most prisoners know—and it is a knowledge that can make you crazy because it is always denied as a lie, an exaggeration, an obvious reflection of why you're a prisoner in the first place—it is utterly impossible to communicate with the “force,” much less the people, holding you in subjugation.⁵

For war captives subject to the United States prison regime and prisoners held in supermaximum or security-housing conditions, it is arguably the case that communication and representation, both aesthetically and politically, are not only impossible in the sense of futile but are practically speaking impermissible. Under this condition, where more recognizable modes of reading, writing, speaking, visualizing, teaching, and organizing are unavailable, prisoners must use other means to confiscate the authority to represent themselves and to speak about the power under whose dominion they reside. With a few exceptions, prisoners everywhere have always had to invent creative means to live and act, to read and write, in prison. That body of subjugated knowledge, an exemplary history of the “infrapolitical,” is what the extraordinary genre of “prison literature” teaches over and over again.⁶ That body of subjugated

knowledge is often the very subject of the instruction and teaching prisoners engage in with each other in prison.⁷ That body of subjugated knowledge constitutes a radical methodology of imprisonment, a pedagogy of finding and making life where death and destruction dominate. That body of subjugated knowledge, which shows and tells how to live in the space of death, dispossession, and disenfranchisement, is what I'm calling a methodology of imprisonment. It requires analytic awareness of the prison regime, but is not reducible to it.

It's not surprising that the more repressive are the conditions or regime of imprisonment, the more inventive are the means of political and aesthetic representation; prisoners are renowned for making all kinds of things out of the highly controlled residues of the prison, including the remaking of themselves. Under extremely repressive conditions, the confiscation of the authority to represent is also more dangerous, more risky, the punishment for disobedience more severe, especially where the theft of authority is critically articulated and collective or grounded in solidarity with others. When communication is utterly impossible and other weapons and means unavailable, the terrain of the discourse of struggle, which is always a struggle for life, becomes increasingly bound up with death itself, since the degradation, the disposability, of a permanently confined life in time and space makes such a life not only taxing to bear but expendable.

There Was No Other Alternative

We see this today at the military prison in Guantánamo Bay, where there have been hunger-to-the-death strikes (and forced feeding) since it opened, sometimes as many as two hundred people—half the prisoners—striking at once. Referencing Bobby Sands and the Northern Irish prisoners, and having the long-standing Turkish example in mind as well, the prisoners, held incommunicado and

indefinitely, have been using hunger strikes to organize themselves and to deepen their political consciousness and antagonisms.⁸ The prisoners at Guantánamo Bay have also at least twice attempted mass suicide: in 2003 twenty prisoners tried to take their lives, and in June 2006 three (Mani al-Utaibi, Yasser al-Zahrani, Ali Abdullah) successfully hanged themselves in a conscious and coordinated act of rebellion (Worthington 269–80). Jumah Abdel-Latif al-Dossari first tried, unsuccessfully, to kill himself in October 2005. At that time, he wrote a letter to his lawyer, Joshua Colangelo-Bryan, and his interpreter, Khaled, saying farewell and explaining why his lawyer would find him hanging in his cell, arm deeply cut, but still alive:

In fact, I don't know where to begin . . . or how to begin[. . .] I feel very sorry for forcing you to see . . . It might be the first time in your life . . . to see a human being [. . .] dying in front of your eyes . . . I know it is an awful and horrible scene, but[. . .] There was no other alternative to make our voice heard by the world from the depths of the detention centers [. . .] for the world to re-examine its standing and for the fair people of America to look again at the situation and try to have a moment of truth with themselves[. . .] The detainees are suffering from the bitterness of despair, the detention humiliation and the vanquish of slavery and suppression[. . .].

Take some of my blood . . . take pieces of my death shrouds . . . take some of my remains . . . take pictures of my dead body when I am placed in my grave, lonely . . . send it to the world . . . to the judges . . . to people with live conscious . . . to people with principles and values, 'the fair-minded' . . . To make them carry the burden of guilt in front of the world for this soul that was wasted with no guilt it has ever done . . . To make them all carry this burden in front of the future generations for this wasted soul that has done no sin . . . To make them carry this burden of guilt in front of history for this soul that was wasted with no reason . . . After this soul

has suffered the worst by the hands of “the protectors of peace and the callers for democracy, freedom, equality and justice”[. . .].

At this moment, I see death looming in front of me while writing this letter. . . Death has a bad odor that cannot be smelled except by people who are going through the agony of death[. . .]. (“Dying”)⁹

Al-Dossari has since tried to kill himself many times, never succeeding. The authorities treat him less as a troublemaker and more as a pathetically disturbed individual who requires supervision and isolation. In my opinion, this is both inaccurate and unwise. Inaccurate because al-Dossari clearly understands the enslavement masquerading as freedom the United States has long promoted. Unwise because al-Dossari delivered a curse on those of us not yet captured. The prisoner’s curse is most assuredly a form of literacy, a subjugated knowledge, and a methodology of imprisonment in the way I discuss here. But it is also a curse, a bane, and an incitement to magic—and, as a curse, it should be treated very carefully.

“Take Some of My Remains . . . Send It to the World. . . . To Make Them Carry the Burden”

A curse is a malediction, bad speech, conveying a current that might alter fate, might re-chart or transform a destiny that had seemed to be traveling the other way. It is the learned language of the accursed themselves. It is an angry, demanding, sometimes vengeful language, registering the recalcitrance, the indifference, the venality that prompted it. It is a reply to the social death sentence, a stepping back into the stream of time, a demand on the world *in front of history*, a hurling of a heavy burden carried back across to them. The curse confiscates the authority to speak in a context in which communication is utterly impossible. The curse is not so much a means of communicating as a means for ensuring that even if no one is listening, no one can forget.

Abdulla al-Noaimi, a former prisoner at Guantánamo Bay, Former Detainee No. 159, as he signs his name, issued a statement following the deaths of al-Utaibi, al-Zahrani, and Abdullah. At the end of it, he writes:

The three people who did this, I know them very well. I was next to them while they were on hunger strike and they were on hunger strike till death. And if nothing happens about Guantánamo . . . there are more people who will do it, and I can tell you who they are. Finally, sorry to say this, but the whole world would say something if it was alive, but the world is dead. . . . (“Statement”)

Here, then, is perhaps the blade and the burden of the curse. What you will learn—what, once you learn it, you will never forget—is that your world is dead. The curse delivers to you a vision of your own deathly existence laid bare. It is a kind of remythologizing, remaking the illusion of reality or reilluminating the make of reality not with a simple reversal—“You’re really the dead one, not me”—but with a more delicate and deep cut: “I’ve brought you to the other side and you don’t even know it yet. How will you cross back without me?”

The prisoner’s curse, then, replies to the social death sentence in multiple voices. It asserts the life world and life force, the anticipatory afterlife, of the ones whose existence has been denied, abandoned, forgotten. “I am not what you say I am.”¹⁰ It demands to know what the captive has done to deserve the reduction in and deprivation of personhood to which he or she is subject. “How have I come to appear to you so indelicately, as nothing or nobody to whom a care should be shown or a harm can be done?” And it calls for reparation. “You will carry the burden of guilt in front of the world for me.” The prisoner’s curse also declares that, contrary to appearances, the social death sentence obtains, belongs to the ones who maintain and enforce its brutal reality and gratuitous fictionality, the ones

who negate, deny, abandon their fellow human beings. Without fellowship, they possess and are possessed by social death. Prefaced by an unnecessary apology—"sorry to say this . . . but the world is dead"—the curse cuts away at the effort to create an impassable, uncrossable border of fate, of faith, of kinship barely separating the captured from the not yet captured. The curse cries out: "It could be you; it might be you. Don't you see?" And it also holds out a gracious hand, despite the fact that it is "horrible and unfair" that the ones so troubled and burdened should have to do this too (Moten). "Here, let me show you what remains unimaginable to you. Here, we will return somewhere else together. Here, together, we will hasten the arrival of the Time of Nobody."

NOTES

1. See Gordon, *Keeping Good Time* 207–11, esp. 209.
2. See also Gordon, "Abu Ghraib" and "Normalcy."
3. Rodríguez's idea of possession is important and more complex than I'm rendering it here: "I am attempting to examine the ways in which it is the prison regime that possesses and constitutes the state. . . . I am invoking a doubled meaning to the terms of 'possession': first, in the sense of a haunting intervention—the state's 'possession' by the sometimes ghostly and always haunting technologies of power and violence that emanate from the prison . . . ; and second, as a reference to the . . . undeniably massive political influence of the prison regime's designated agents and administrators on the broader architecture of the state" (43).
4. The "Time of Nobody" is from a wonderful and clever novel about the search for "The Bad and the Evil" (the content of which is patently obvious even though it means different things to different people), jointly written by Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Subcomandante Marcos.
5. On the impossibility, I am taking a line from Rodríguez: "This body of knowledge and truth [by radical prison intellectuals] is premised on the utter impossibility of dialogue and communication with the force—discursive, embodied, institutionalized—of one's own domination" (9).
6. This genre would be unknown to scholars today without the seminal work of Franklin and of Harlow. On infrapolitics, see Scott; Kelley.
7. See, e.g., Saadawi; Feldman; Jackson; and Mbeki.
8. As Binyam Mohammed said, "I do not plan to stop until either I die or we are respected. People will defi-

nately die. Bobby Sands petitioned the British government to stop the illegitimate internment of Irishmen without trial. He had the courage of his convictions and he starved himself to death. Nobody should believe for one moment that my brothers here have less courage" (qtd. in Gillan).

9. Ellipses in brackets are my own. See also Center for Constitutional Rights (esp. 16).

10. About the prison rebellion at Attica, James Baldwin famously said, "People are often not what we think they are" (*Attica*).

WORKS CITED

- Attica Rebellion: Thirty Years Later. The Freedom Archives.* 7 Sept. 2001 <<http://www.freedomarchives.org/>>.
- Center for Constitutional Rights. *Report on Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment of Prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.* New York: Center for Constitutional Rights, 2006.
- "Dying for You to Listen." *CagePrisoners*. 16 Mar. 2006. 10 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.cageprisoners.com/articles.php?id=12861>>.
- Feldman, Allen. *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Foucault, Michel. "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews.* Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977. 205–17.
- . *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976.* Ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist.* New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Gillan, Audrey. "Hunger Strikers Pledge to Die in Guantánamo." *Guardian* 9 Sept. 2005: 1.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California.* Berkeley: U of California P, 2007.
- Gordon, Avery. "Abu Ghraib: Imprisonment and the War on Terror." *Race and Class* 48.1 (2006): 42–59.
- . *Keeping Good Time: Knowledge, Power and People.* Boulder: Paradigm, 2004.
- . "The Normalcy of Exceptional Brutality." *The Violence of Incarceration.* Ed. Phil Scraton and Jude McCullough. London: Routledge, forthcoming.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention.* Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1992.
- Jackson, George. *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson.* New York: Bantam, 1970.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class.* New York: Free, 1996.

- Mbeki, Govan. *Learning from Robben Island: Govan Mbeki's Prison Writings*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1991.
- Moten, Fred. Personal correspondence with author. 12 Dec. 2006.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007.
- Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Saadawi, Nawal el. *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. Trans. Marilyn Booth. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.
- Sexton, Jared, and Elizabeth Lee. "Figuring the Prison: Prerequisites of Torture at Abu Ghraib." *Antipode* 38 (2006): 1005–22.
- "Statement from Former Guantanamo Detainee, Abdullah Alnoaimi on Guantanamo Deaths." *CagePrisoners*. 14 June 2006 <<http://www.cageprisoners.com/articles.php?id=14460>>.
- Taibo II, Paco Ignacio, and Subcomandante Marcos. *The Uncomfortable Dead (What's Missing Is Missing)*. Trans. Carlos Lopez. New York: Akashic, 2006.
- Worthington, Andy. *The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison*. London: Pluto, 2007.