

○ VOLUME 10 NUMBER 2, 2011

FEATURED ARTICLE

Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity

Avery F. Gordon

The University of California, Santa Barbara

*In this article, I offer some reflections on the theme of haunting and futurity by revisiting those terms as they appeared in my book *Ghostly Matters* and by asking what futurity might mean for prisoners subject to the social death sentence. The article ends with a discussion of 'doing time'.*

What follows are some reflections on the theme haunting and futurity.¹ I'll start by summarizing the terms with which I was thinking about 'the future' directly and incipiently in my book *Ghostly Matters* (2008a). The general orientation I took there and then pursued subsequently in some writing I did on the utopian remains a guide in the work I've been doing for some time now on imprisonment and captivity. It's to the question of what futurity might mean for those prisoners subject to the social death sentence that I'll then turn.

Haunting and the Something-to-be-done

The very ambitious problem that preoccupied me in *Ghostly Matters* (and still does) was how to understand and write evocatively about some of the ways that modern forms of dispossession, exploitation and repression concretely impact the lives of the people most affected by them and impact our shared conditions of living. To me, this meant trying to understand the terms of racial capitalism and the determining role of monopolistic and militaristic state violence. The two main case studies in the book are about transatlantic slavery and political repression and state terror in the Southern Cone of Latin America in the 1970s. This question reflected the type of Marxist analysis in which I was intellectually reared and trained. And with which I still have a certain affinity, although it is perhaps a Marxism closer to that variety the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano only partially jokingly called Magical Marxism, in which the three halves of reason, passion, and mystery exceed the whole (Galeano 1992, p. 223). I've kept a meaningful connection to the Marxist tradition, the English Marxist tradition in particular (William Morris, E.P. Thompson, Raymond

Williams, John Berger) but like many others had to part company with Marxism's orthodoxies and reductions, especially its aggravating refusal to accept the incontrovertible fact of racial capitalism itself. It was Marxism's ongoing trivialization of the problem of racism, and the larger mistake in comprehension this entailed, that, more than anything else, defined the way I parted company in *Ghostly Matters*.

Haunting was the language and the experiential modality by which I tried to reach an understanding of the meeting of organized force and meaning because haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (such as with transatlantic slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is continuously denied (such as with free labor or national security). Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What's distinctive about haunting as I used the term (and this is not its only way, of course) is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term haunting to describe those singular and yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind field comes into view.

Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in linear time, alters the way we normally separate and sequence the past, the present and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. As I understand it, the ghost is not the invisible or the unknown or the constitutively unknowable, in the Derridean sense. To my mind, the whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, demands your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we're notified that what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us.

Haunting always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present and is for this reason quite frightening. But haunting, unlike trauma by contrast, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done. Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and the rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings won't go away, when easily living one day and then the next becomes impossible, when the present seamlessly becoming 'the future' gets entirely jammed up. Haunting

refers to this socio-political-psychological state when something else, or something different from before, feels like it must be done, and prompts a something-to-be-done.

It is in large measure on behalf and in the interests of the something-to-be-done (which may be political in the formal sense but is not only) that I have thought the concept's main value lay. To see the something-to-be-done as characteristic of haunting was, on the one hand, to limit its scope. For many people, haunting means exactly the opposite--aberrant mourning, traumatic paralysis or dissociative repetition. For better or worse, the emphasis on the something-to-be-done was a way of focusing on the cultural requirements or dimensions of individual, social, or political movement and change. And one of those requirements was that the ghost him or herself be treated respectfully (its desires broached) and not ghosted or abandoned or disappeared again in the act of dealing with the haunting, even if the ghost cannot be permitted to take everything over, a complicated requirement that's especially pertinent with the living who haunt as if they were dead. To repeat, for me haunting is not about invisibility or unknowability per se, it refers us to what's living and breathing in the place hidden from view: people, places, histories, knowledge, memories, ways of life, ideas. To show what's there in the blind field, to bring it to life on its own terms (and not merely to light) is perhaps the radicalization of enlightenments with which I've been most engaged.

This particular approach to or definition of haunting—again limited in many important ways—had then at its core a contest over the future, over what's to come next or later. That's to say, to the extent that a something-to-be-done is characteristic of haunting, one can say that futurity is imbricated or interwoven into the very scene of haunting itself. As I was using it, haunting is an emergent state: the ghost arises, carrying the signs and portents of a repression in the past or the present that's no longer working. The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers. Something will happen. What will happen of course, is not given in advance, but something must be done. I think this emergent state is also the critical analytic moment. That's to say, when the repression isn't working anymore the trouble that results creates conditions that demand re-narrativization. What's happening? How did it come to pass? What does it mean? When the repression isn't working anymore the trouble that results creates conditions that also invite action. What do I do? Can you help? Will it get better? The something-to-be-done is something you have to try/do for yourself: while it can be shared, it can't be imposed or even given as a gift. If you have any doubts about this, read again Freud's 'Dora' case where what's on display is the utter failure—for Freud, for Ida Bauer (the real Dora)—of forced analysis.

A Very Brief Word on Trauma

Haunting is often treated as more or less identical to trauma. But trauma and the time of trauma are, in my view, quite different. In the classic psychoanalytic conception, trauma not only misaligns our perception of time, it is, one could say, itself a misalignment of the temporality of experience since trauma is characteristically experienced belatedly. That's to say, it's the repression of the shocking or horrible experience and its displaced repetition that characterizes trauma and that jams time so that one experiences the shock later. As Freud and others have shown, a traumatized person or society is stuck in a past that repeats as a present that can never end. Trauma thus binds you to what can't be forgotten or forgiven. It binds you not to the repetition of a memory of a terrible, horrible, shocking event or experience but binds you to the *repression* of it. This repetition of and libidinal investment in the repression binds the future—what comes next—to the trauma, which is what never ends, what can't end. In this sense, trauma is a deeply regressive and repressive state—an awful predicament for both individuals and societies—a fatalistic and aberrant condition because seemingly interminable.

The empirical referent or concrete circumstances upon which trauma or haunting (or anything really) is studied obviously determines to a large degree the nature of its theorization since it's those circumstances, situations, problems, puzzles, emergencies that motivate and require theoretical understanding and justification. For example, the significance of war trauma for Freud and the role he played in legitimating the punishment and 'treatment' of World War I soldiers suffering from it is clear. In the end, Freud never managed to avoid the adaptive 'cure'.² Or, I think it's inarguable that the Holocaust was central to—the paradigm for—trauma studies as this field developed in the United States. Each of the main references or cases from which I tried to theorize haunting in *Ghostly Matters* was, in some respects, a case of rebellion, movement, a demand for a livable future: a young woman patient (Sabina Spielrein) manages to get out of the triangular relationship between two competitive great men; the Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo dare to openly fight the state sponsored system of disappearance terrorizing Argentina and the Southern Cone; African-becoming-American slaves run away into a freedom that has to be made by them.

Certainly a scene of haunting can emerge from trauma or end in one; they are kin for sure. And certain too is our need to sympathetically understand the traumatization process and its consequences. For my own part, I have always been interested in movement—individual and social—and how to live otherwise than in the putatively inevitable repetition of the degradations and depredations that injure us. With this particular conception of haunting, I was trying to develop a working vocabulary that registered and evoked the lived and living meeting, in their historical time, of the organized forces of order and

the aggrieved person when consciousness of that meeting was arising, haunting, forcing a confrontation, forking the past and the future. I thought at that meeting point—in the gracious but careful reckoning with the ghost—we could locate some elements of a practice for moving towards eliminating the conditions that produce the haunting in the first place. For me, this is as much a personal as an intellectual question, and as an intellectual approach it reflects my desire to try to learn how to end the suffering, not merely how to diagnose or diagram or justify or witness it. This perhaps makes my definition of haunting entirely self-serving, but it also makes it alight on that moment or process when the next or what's-to-come is grappling with, emerging out of, a comprehension that the repression is failing, that it is not inevitable, not fatal, not one's fate. Something is being freed and there's a reach for it. The reach is key. The something-to-be done is not ever given in advance, but it can be cultivated towards more just and peaceful ends.

This emergent rather than fatalistic conception of haunting often (to the extent that it is or is becoming an explicitly subversive or rebellious consciousness) lends the something-to-be-done a certain retrospective urgency: the something-to-be-done feels as if it has already been needed or wanted before, perhaps forever, certainly for a long time, and we cannot wait for it any longer. We're haunted, as Herbert Marcuse wrote, by the 'historic alternatives' that could have been.

A Digression on Jacques Derrida and Ghosts and the Utopian

As Marcuse wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*, the 'historical alternatives' haunt not only because they represent other possibilities, other better presents and futures, but because 'the values attached to these alternatives ... become facts when they are translated into reality by ... practice' (Marcuse 1964, pp. xi-xii). That real alternatives (what Marcuse means by historical) are already here, embedded in the practice of subversion and not hiding in some elusive or fantasmatic futurity, is profoundly unsettling: this knowledge makes the present waver, makes it not quite what we thought it was. This living knowledge is a power on its own, the object of a great deal of repressive activity by states and civil societies and families, too. Antonio Negri figured the intimation of this power in an essay entitled 'The Specter's Smile', his critical response to Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, answering, before it was actually posed, Derrida's question of why Negri wants to 'bring ontology into it', why he wants to 'recover the full concrete reality of the process of genesis hidden behind the specter's masks' (Derrida 1999, p. 258). Negri's answer is given in the following story where he writes:

In Alexis de Tocqueville's *Recollections*, we're told of a day in June 1848. We're in a lovely apartment on the left bank, seventh arrondissement, at dinnertime. The Tocqueville family is reunited. Nevertheless, in the calm of the evening, the cannodade fired by the bourgeoisie against the rebellion of rioting workers resounds

suddenly—distant noises from the right bank. The diners shiver, their faces darken. But a smile escapes a young waitress who serves their table and has just arrived from the Faubourg Saint Antoine. She's immediately fired. Isn't that the true specter of communism perhaps there in that smile? [Negri asks] The one that frightened the Tsar, the pope ... and the Lord of Tocqueville? Isn't a glimmer of joy there, making for the specter of liberation? (Negri 1999, p. 15)

The waitress, of course, is not a ghost, but rather a servant. And she smiles the smile of the servant who has suddenly and unexpectedly appeared as a secret agent, exposing nothing more but nothing less than the existence of another intelligent world her employers do not and cannot own or dismiss. (Herman Melville rendered this smile in a most complete and frightening way in his 1855 short story, *Benito Cereno*, about a slave rebellion on a Spanish merchant ship.) This smile is scandalous and unsettling because it carries what Herbert Marcuse called a 'qualitative difference' that inheres in both the intimation and the reality of liberation (Marcuse 1969, p. 88). I'm not sure that this smile refracts a true or more authentic communism, but I'm quite sure that it is part of the abolitionist imaginary.

In the course of describing how the meaning he gives to messianicity differs from Walter Benjamin, Derrida parenthetically gives one of his most pithy definitions of the spectral: 'the experience of the non-present, of the non-living present in the living present, of that which lives on' (Derrida 1999, p. 254). The dangling phrase, added as a supplemental to the experience of the non-present in the living present, suggests that the non-present is the past: something that is over or past nonetheless lives on. And yet Derrida is definitely speaking of the future, of the what's-to-come. Moreover, he rejects strongly—his tone is adamant—the presumption made by Frederic Jameson that 'the messianicity and spectrality ... at the heart of *Specters of Marx*' is 'Utopia or Utopianism' (1999, p. 248). Derrida doesn't like this at all! '*Anything but Utopian*' he cries in italicized letters (1999, p. 249).

The reason why he doesn't like it is, he says, because messianicity for him is 'inseparable from an affirmation of otherness and justice' while the utopian, taken in its most ordinary and taken for granted meaning, presumes the presence of a perfect world, a world in which there is no otherness because no difference in Derrida's sense; a world where there would be no justice because there would be nothing to correct, to restore, to re-balance. This simplistic definition of utopia is a ruse—Derrida never rests with simple definitions. What's at stake here for him (and it is confirmed and collaborated by the angry tone throughout the whole essay about Marxism and the 'sons' of Marx) is a notion of the 'power' of the 'affirmation of an unpredictable future-to-come' that remains independent of what Derrida euphemistically calls 'determinate historico-political phases'. In other words, any politics or desire of the future that is more concrete or specific than the 'universal, quasi-transcendental structure' Derrida calls 'messianicity

without messianism' must be rejected. And what is this universal structure? It is deconstruction, which according to Derrida accounts for 'disastrous historical failures' (1999, p. 221) and thus effects a 'repoliticization'. Or, as he says, 'the limit to calculability or knowledge is ... for a finite being, the condition of praxis, decision, action and responsibility' (1999, p. 249).

In many ways, everything I have to say about haunting (spectrality) and the future is at odds with Derrida's drift, even though I am sympathetic to his annoyance with Marxism. I'm at odds with his drift and with his conclusion, which is, in my view, a return to the primacy of the epistemological. Although Derrida frames his discussion as a question of ontology: 'what is to be said about *philosophy as ontology* in the inheritance left us by Marx?' (1999, p. 214). His answer is epistemological, a return to the basic and, for Derrida, most important fact of life: the limits of knowledge and the role of thought and philosophy in demonstrating this fact as praxis, decision, action, responsibility. With epistemology it is possible, necessary even, to affirm otherness. Awareness of the limits of knowledge, awareness of the impossibility of knowing it all, and awareness of the dangers of being a know-it-all are certainly important conditions of a just praxis, but they are not sufficient in and of themselves. Ontology, by contrast, takes us onto the terrain of what Michel Foucault called subjugated knowledge and to the person and their being. Persons are not merely mortal (finite beings) but living breathing complex people who cannot be approached or treated justly if there is an absolute necessity to affirm their otherness. Quite the opposite is needed by them and by us.

Haunting, Urgency, and Meanwhile Carrying On

We're haunted, as Herbert Marcuse wrote, by the 'historic alternatives' that could have been and by the peculiar temporality of the shadowing of lost and better futures that insinuates itself in the something-to-be-done, sometimes as nostalgia, sometimes as regret, sometimes as a kind of critical urgency. When the something-to-be-done becomes urgent, we feel as if we can't wait any longer for things to change, but of course one does wait, sometimes patiently, sometimes not. This waiting peculiar to urgency is what Raymond Williams called 'carrying on regardless',³ detaching the exigency from presentism (ahistoricism) in order to situate the urgent or the emergency simultaneously in the past, present and future (Williams 1989, p. 288). And in order to insist—and I think this is crucial—on the necessity of the something-to-be-done retaining an important measure of independence from immediate crises and from the terms in which these crises are given and made. Remember that Raymond Williams was talking about people who carry on regardless of the predictable and recurring obituaries of socialism and its promise of an equitable alternative to capitalist life.

The something-to-be-done is almost always responding to an emergency—a situation that requires immediate attention. Nonetheless, it must be approached with an urgency that's autonomous and self-directed towards ends and aims not wholly given and certainly not given permission by the system's logics or crises but rather invented elsewhere and otherwise. I take it as axiomatic that we are not merely reactive subjects but that we are, to use Kodwo Eshun's word, 'inaugurating' ones, and therefore do not need permission from higher authorities to replace them!⁴ In this, I think, Williams was also right to see that a certain melancholy or what John Berger calls 'undefeated despair' is bound to the work of carrying on regardless: to keeping urgent the repair of injustice and the care-taking of the aggrieved and the missing; to keeping urgent the systematic dismantling of the conditions that produce the crises and the misery in the first place while at the same time instantiating in the practice itself the slower temporality of the wait and the distinct onto-epistemological affects of autonomous, independent, participatory thoughtful practice.

This particular combination of acute timeliness and patience, of there being no time to waste at all and the necessity of taking your time, is what I associate with the abolitionist imaginary, which has guided the worldwide movements to abolish slavery and captivity, colonialism, imprisonment, militarism, foreign debt bondage, and to abolish the capitalist world order known today as globalization or neo-liberalism. Abolition recognizes that transformative time doesn't always stop the world, as if in an absolute break between now and then, but is a daily part of it, a way of being in the ongoing work of emancipation, a work which inevitably must take place while you're still enslaved, imprisoned, indebted, occupied, walled in, commodified, etc.

Abolition involves critique, refusal and rejection of that which you want to abolish, but it also involves being or 'becoming unavailable for servitude', to use Toni Cade Bambara's words. Needless to say, being or becoming unavailable for servitude takes a certain amount of time and trouble and one reason why is that, among other things, being or becoming unavailable for servitude involves cultivating an indifference, an ability to be in-difference to the system's own benefits and its own technologies of improvement. This kind of in-difference is an important form of political and individual consciousness and it is also a conceptual measure of abolition itself. It's key to anticipating, inhabiting, making the world you want to live in now, urgently, as if you couldn't live otherwise, peacefully, as if you have all the time in the world.

Fatality and the Prisoner

The problem of making or finding a future is acute for US prisoners who increasingly and in great numbers must make their lives either in

prison (1 in 100 adults) or under the supervision of the criminal justice system (1 in 32 adults, which includes those in prison, on probation or on parole, around 7 million in 2009). As is well known, the US incarcerates more of its population than any other country in the world; with 5 percent of the world's population, it holds 25% of the world's prison population. Although the US leads the world in imprisonment, globally the trend is toward increased use of imprisonment, increased prison populations and increased levels of punishment.

About 10 years ago, Craig Haney, the US's most humane expert on supermaximum imprisonment, shared with me a social science fiction scenario he wrote in which he outlined the shape of a new social order that began to be established in the last decades of the 1980s.⁵ This social order was defined by and divided into three distorted and dependent classes: a prisoner class housed in a vast network of prisons, a class of guards and jailers who service the network, and a class of professional legal and administrative elites who decide into which of the other two categories the bulk of the population will be placed. When Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 to notify Europe of the consequences of wage slavery brought on by the rise of industrial capitalism, they warned that capitalist civilization would strive to create 'a world after its own image'. Haney was issuing a similar warning, asking us to comprehend the outlines—the shadow—of a new civilization in which the prison industrial complex creates 'a world after its own image'.

Without melodramatizing the point, I think it's fair to say that the specter of such a haunted and haunting future should not be dismissed or trivialized; the rapidity with which hard-won civil and legal rights guaranteeing protection from authoritarian police states have been taken and given away in the name of national security should be a clear warning that the future comes often before it has been formally invited or approved.

Mass imprisonment is an enormously complex and challenging subject, and it is not my main topic here. I'll describe briefly how I've been approaching my study of it and return to the question of haunted futurities at a much-reduced scale.

Fate, Fatality, Social Death

I've been trying to understand the meaning and the human consequences of imprisonment as an old but newly intensified modality of domination and the particular types of subjugated knowledges that arise out of it and in relation to it.⁶ I've been following three figures—the criminal, the prisoner of war, and the abolitionist. I've been especially concerned with the role of racism, with 'state sanctioned' 'fatal couplings of power and difference', to quote Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Fate and fatality 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 people of color, ethnic/religious minorities, migrants, and dissidents), but also explains what the prisoner becomes.

A major underlying argument here is that racism is not merely external to imprisonment, that prisoners are never only racial subjects in the sense in which we commonly use that word. Imprisonment is also a medium of racialized state-craft and prisoners are usually, and definitively in the United States, considered in law and in social practice an inferior race in and of themselves. That's to say, 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, and the othering, denigration, stigmatization and the vulnerability to premature death that accompanies such a ranking—in short the state-sponsored coupling of difference and power—this regime of fate has been applied to the prisoner as a class. 'The captive', Orlando Patterson writes, quoting Claude Meillasoux, 'always appears ... as marked by an ... indelible defect which weighs endlessly upon his destiny' (Patterson 1982, p. 20).

I've been following that defect, with its taint of permanency, attempting to link the socio-economic dynamics of accumulation, dispossession and state power to the ontological and epistemological status of the prisoner, and attempting to excavate the thought and practice that subverts and undoes it.

We can call that indelible defect the mark of social death. Social death refers to the process by which a person is socially negated or made a human non-person as the terms of their incorporation into a society: living, they nonetheless appear as if and are treated as if they were dead. The notion of social death aims to clarify what kind of person the prisoner becomes as she or he is civilly disabled or dead in law and in the broader social domain. Alessandro de Giorgi, for example, distinguishes between the 'biological event' and the 'biographical experience' of death and argues that prisoners and other 'undeserving categories of people' are subject to a new 'right of death' that alters the terms of bio-politics as we've previously known them. 'The aim of contemporary power technologies...seems no longer to be 'to foster life or disallow it' but 'to foster life *by* disallowing it'" (de Giorgi 2006, pp. xi-xii).⁷ Or, as George Jackson wrote, 'The very first time it was like dying ... Capture, imprisonment is the closest thing to being dead that one is likely to experience in his life' (Jackson 1970, pp. 18, 19-20).

The fullest analysis and theorization of the notion of social death was made by Orlando Patterson in his seminal work, *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), where he described social death as an idiom of power, a language for making systematic relations of domination and exploitation socially and cognitively acceptable. Patterson's extensive historical and comparative study of slavery was not focused on the

political or economic motivations for enslavement (for which he's been roundly criticized) but rather on the process of social negation, the latter being, Patterson persuasively demonstrated, the one constant in the complex historical variety of slave systems and types. The question of whether imprisonment is or isn't like slavery or a type of slavery is a particularly politicized one in the United States because of the obvious historical connections between plantation slavery and the development of the modern prison system, because of the overrepresentation of Black people in a prison system whose violence is renowned, and because the proximate relationship between imprisonment and enslavement is legally enriched in the Constitution's Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, *except as punishment for a crime*. It remains the case today that slavery is constitutionally enabled in the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction for prisoners and for prisoners only.⁸ Patterson's argument that social death is an idiom of power, a symbolic and ritualistic representation, expands its reach and permits its appropriation, without requiring us to also argue that imprisonment is slavery.⁹

The language of death is an idiom of power, a symbolic and ritualistic representation, but it begins for the enslaved as a literal substitution. Slavery was almost always a substitute for the death that would otherwise befall the defeated enemy in war or the criminal awaiting capital punishment. In fact, the substitution was understood as the origin or the source of the slave's condition of powerlessness. This understanding was key. It lent to the condition of enslavement the aura of salvation—it saved you from death—and at the same time inscribed in the ontology of the slave a permanent connection to the death sentence. As Patterson writes: 'The condition of slavery did not ... erase the prospect of death. Slavery was not a pardon; it was ... a conditional commutation...' (1982, p. 5). In exchange for commuting the death sentence, and the death sentence itself is the mark of the captive's incapacity to exchange even on the most degraded or unequal terms, the owner acquired the 'slave's life' (1982, p. 5). Patterson rightly emphasizes the importance of what's acquired—not just a property interest in a person or a person treated as a property object—but the entire life (1982, pp. 18-27). In exchange for avoiding immediate death, what's taken from the captive is his past, his family, his culture, his honor, his future, his very being. In exchange for his life, he must give his life.

And what of this life? The captive is offered a life of externally imposed social negation. In the words used by Judge Thomas Ruffin in an important 1892 case that extended the right of a slave owner to wound and kill his own slaves, the captive is offered a life *doomed in his own person and his posterity* (Patterson 1982, p. 3). Fate and fatality. The enslaved will be granted no legitimately recognized existence independent of the entity—state, corporation, crown, empire, temple, individual etc.—to whom he is absolutely subject, who possesses a monopoly interest in him. A 'nonperson', he is thoroughly

dishonored and natively alienated, separated from 'all "rights" or claims of birth', treated as a 'genealogical isolate' with neither present nor future claims or obligations to living and dead 'blood relations' (1982, pp. 5-7). 'Ceas[ing] to belong in his own right', the enslaved lose, in effect, birthright, a socially recognized place in the stream of time itself (1982, p. 5). This is fatal. It is as if he or she were never alive to begin with. As Claude Meillassoux famously put it:

The captive always appears therefore as marked by an original, indelible defect which weighs endlessly upon his destiny. This is ... a kind of 'social death'. He can never be brought to life again as such ... [he] will remain forever an unborn being (non-né) (quoted in Patterson 1982, p. 38).

According to Patterson, there are two primary representational modes by which the social death sentence is rendered or narrated. In the 'intrusive' mode, where capture in war is the principal method of enslavement, the slave is taken to be 'the permanent enemy on the inside', the stranger, the foreigner, hostile, alien (1982, p. 39). Patterson quotes a telling saying of the Bella Coola Indians of British Columbia: 'No slaves [they say] came to earth with the first people' (1982, p. 39). In the 'extrusive' mode, where criminality, poverty, misery, heresy, and rebelliousness are the principal conduits to enslavement, the slave is conceived as a fallen insider, as someone who might have or did in principle belong, but has been 'expelled' and now no longer belongs (1982, p. 41). The fallen insider has violated the social or legal terms of order, the fallen insider is an outlaw. Here penalty and enslavement are virtually indistinguishable: the slave is a criminal, the criminal is a slave. In some cases, most notably ancient China, even the prisoner of war, who under most circumstances was considered a foreign outsider, was 'legally and ideologically assimilated to the status of the internal criminal' (1982, p. 42). Here's Patterson's summary:

In the intrusive mode the slave was ... someone who did not belong because he was an outsider, while in the extrusive mode the slave became an outsider because he did not (or no longer) belong. In the intrusive mode, the slave was an external exile, an intruder; in the extrusive mode he was an internal exile, one who had been deprived of all claims of community. The one fell because he was the enemy, the other became the enemy because he had fallen. (1982, p. 44)

The idiom of social death speaks about the captive but is only partially addressed to him or her. The idiom of social death teaches, Patterson says, 'how ordinary people should relate to the living who are dead' (1982, p. 45). Patterson's claim that social death is an explanation or justification for systematic social negation, a mark of an essential and permanent difference whose production and contingency must at all costs be hidden, is absolutely crucial. Social death is too often, wrongly I think, presumed to be both a condition exclusive to the ones so tainted and a condition that defines the totality of the slave or the

prisoner's being. Social death is an externally imposed form of social negation, it has in fact quite real—awful and horrible—effects; and some people do succumb to it and are broken, really do exist in a kind of purgatory. But, social death is rarely a complete achievement, either socially or existentially. And, it is emphatically not a singular but a relational idiom that speaks most intently, most essentially, to those ordinary people who need (or accept) instruction in how to relate to those proximate populations—slaves, prisoners, undocumented migrants, the very poor, the abandoned, the enemy, the subversive...—whose degraded status is deemed required for the rest of our well-being.

The face of social death—the fallen enemy—helps to mask the general terms which underwrite the dominant normal social order by explaining the captive's status as intrinsic to his being, his actions, his failures, his fate *doomed in his person and in posterity*, and by justifying the prohibition against equitable contact with him. The story of the fallen enemy is one way, to paraphrase Rousseau, force is transformed into right and obedience into duty for that large segment of the population—not rulers and not yet captured, and not yet able to imagine themselves as falling into such a state—whose solidarity is required for the whole regime to operate in a state of normalcy, its attendant pathologies and nervous disorders taken as the wonders of progress. Perhaps the main pedagogical function of the idiom of social death is to create moral distance, to create an impassable, uncrossable breach, a breach of fate, a breach of faith, a breach of kinship between those people who are or know themselves to be capable of being subject to such a death sentence, and those people, ordinary as they may be, who are not yet able to imagine such a fate for themselves. The living dead haunt—and frighteningly so—not only because people unjustly rendered ghostly inevitably carry all the nastiness that created them in the first place. The living dead haunt, perhaps more importantly, because in their liminality and in their ability to cross between the worlds of the living and the dead, they carry a sharp double-edged message: it could be you. I could be you.

Prison Time

Social death is not a singular biographical condition but a relational idiom of power. And so regardless of the social death sentence, prisoners must make a life as best they can while in prison. Here the question of the past, the present and the future—indeed time itself—looms large in many complicated ways. Around the prisoner, there is an enormously complex practice and discourse of time. Perhaps the most obvious or seemingly definitive is the way in which the law renders punishment in units of life-time, giving time to be done in the present and taking away a life with a future, with the right to a future time, or futurity. There is, in fact, a whole anthropology of 'people without future' embedded in the culture of poverty assumptions that justify mass imprisonment as poverty management. In this criminal anthropology, people without future have no capacity for deferred

gratification, no willingness to wait for their place, no traditions of saving for later, no capacity to reason anger, an emotional state connected to a primitive past, and so on. People without future are suitable, in this schema, for confinement in an institution that controls both space and time. And, of course, the daily life of the prison is organized like a sadistic Tayloristic time/motion laboratory: regular and surprise head counts (usually 5-6 a day, at the military prisons they were head counting every two hours); meal and shower times designed for maximum inconvenience (always too early) and for maximum control over fraternizing; the routine exercise of internal discipline not only by the temporally disorienting solitary lockdown but by the extra judicial extension of the prison sentence. All this (and more) presents the prisoner with an immediate question each must confront—a something they must do for themselves: how to do the time, how to serve the social death sentence?

Dylan Rodriguez writes that the 'prison's logic of death exterminates time as we know it. Bodies fill up spaces that have been ... constructed within a ... time ... alienated from history' (Rodriguez 2006, p. 212). Part of the 'terror of the prison regime' is the 'endless sameness ... that convinces the imprisoned that their very subjectivity is in question' (p. 213). As Ray Luc Levasseur writes, 'It seems endless. Each morning I look at the same grey door and hear the same rumbles followed by long silences. It is endless' (quoted in Rodriguez 2006, p. 213). In the prison, state power renders the distinction between illusion ('It seems endless') and reality ('It is endless') into a weapon to force the prisoner to serve the time, to assume this alienation. Rodriguez continues, 'tremendous human and technological energies pour into the apparatus for the express purpose of *making time happen*' (2006, p. 214), of giving some semblance of futurity to the endless present of prison time, that 'painful' time Maryland prisoner Q calls 'the dragon' (Leder et al. 2000, p. 86). The prison regime makes time happen by organizing the routine of everyday life—daily counts, meals, showers, exercise, work, study, television, interaction with others—according to the overarching principle of absolute obedience and compliance to its authority, its dominion. If you've never been in a prison, especially a US maximum security prison (or lived in a police state), it's difficult to describe this intense combination of bureaucratic routine and arbitrary authoritarianism. At that maddening intersection, state violence and state power congeal most acutely in the everyday life of the prisoner and for those trying to make contact from the outside. This intersection marks the institutional limits of prison time—they always decide the time. *The word recently has altered since they took you*, John Berger writes. *Tonight I don't want to write how long ago that was. The word recently now covers all that time. Once it meant a few weeks or the day before yesterday* (Berger 2008, p.10).

Thus 'prison time implies a qualitatively different conception of historical possibility and political agency' (Rodriguez 2006, p. 214). Prison does not permit the type of political activism and civil disobedience that's normative and thriving today. Preparation for

future political work, jailhouse lawyering, study, peer political education, being a respected figure or leader in the prison—all these occur in varying degrees. But neither organized nor individual resistance is permitted under any circumstances. In US prisons, this interdiction is violent and carried out under the threat of and with enhanced punishment and discipline: isolation or lock down, extended sentences, psychotropic drugs, physical and psychological abuse, withdrawal of reading and writing privileges, etc. In these circumstances, oppositional politics hover at two poles. At one end and quite rare in the highly militarized US prisons, open insurrection and rebellion where an attempt is made to take control over the prison. At the other end and far more common, what James C. Scott describes as the ‘infrapolitics’ characteristic of situations of extreme domination. Here, turning an obedient face to power hides the ‘transcripts’ of rebellion and resistance produced and shared among the subordinate (Scott 1992).

Redeeming Time

To achieve a measure of agency and possibility at either of these scales, it is necessary, as Q puts it, ‘to *redeem* time’ or ‘master the present’ (Leder et al. 2000, p. 86). This redemption involves refusing the death sentence and its doom, involves refusing to be treated as if one was never born, fated to a life of abandonment and spectrality. In Benjaminian fashion, Q says: ‘If I can master the present, I will have used my time to *redeem* time. Then I can go back and offer something to people who never had to be in that situation’ (2000, p. 86).¹⁰ Back into the stream of time, redeeming time means first and foremost refusing to serve time, to become its servant. Wayne Brown argues that one must choose between ‘doing time’—what Q means by mastering or redeeming it—or serving it. Serving time, he says, is ‘*when time begins to do you*’ (2000, p. 86). Time begins to do you when you get ‘overwhelmed’ by the ‘sentence’. Q says: ‘You can actually go insane. You get caught up in this *time zone*’. Gary Huffman adds: ‘It’s where your mind jumps time’. And Donald Thompson warns, ‘Sometimes you come back, sometimes you don’t’.

To come back, to refuse to serve time, to refuse to live in the time zone of social death, prisoners grasp or forge a relationship to futurity that’s very complex, especially for those on death row or for those who will spend their lives in prison. One element of this complexity is the process by which each individual restores his own civil life or citizenship in the prison. Prisoners are citizens (in the sense of members of the social community) despite how they are treated, writes Gregory Frederick, and the capacity to act on this presumption is essential for being imprisoned but not living in its time zone. ‘I’ve seen guys who as soon as they get their sentence from the judge, they take it as a literal meaning. They don’t have enough insight to know that when the judge says “life,” he’s not talking about your natural life’. They assume they’re ‘powerless’, John Woodland says.

Well, Charles Baxter replies: 'A lot of those individuals was locked up before they actually got locked up in prison' (Leder et al. 2000, p. 88).

Redeeming time by being or becoming unavailable to serve it as it is given returns us to our abolitionist imaginary and to a more fugitive, resistive, idiom of social life in which the prisoner, fungible property of the state, a Nobody in Subcommandante Marcos's terms, confiscates the authority to speak and to act for him or herself, without waiting for permission to do so (Marcos & Taibo II 2006). This being or becoming unavailable for servitude finds expression as everyday life, as art and literature, as radical thought, and as organized resistance and rebellion. Sometimes, as for poet Asha Bandele, it takes expression as a defiant and despairing phrase your husband with a life sentence ends every meeting, letter or phone call with: 'see you in a minute, baby, see you in a minute' (Bandele 2000).

As the core of this process of redeeming time is the enormously difficult and unending work of learning to refuse to allow 'the prison to be the sole arbiter' of one's life or as Gregory Frederick puts it, to 'live in prison without allowing the evil of prison to live' in you (Bandele 2000, p. 71; Frederick 2001, p. 85). If there is one clear lesson that prisoners who refuse the social death sentence teach, it is that to redeem a future, a life, out of a space of living death requires an integrity and fortitude that's impervious to the contingencies of institutionalized dehumanization and domination. It requires, you could say, a leap of faith or fate. As Nawal el Saadawi wrote in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*:

From the moment I opened my eyes upon my first morning in prison, I understood from the motion of my body as I was rising and stretching the muscles of my neck and back, that I had made a firm decision: I would live in this place as I had lived in any other. It was a decision which appeared insane... for it would cancel out reality, logic, the walls and the steel doors. (el Saadawi 1986, p. 35)¹¹

The capacity to find and make a space of freedom in the space of death is to carry on regardless, patiently, urgently, as if there's not a moment to waste. To carry on regardless in this way, to act as if you are free when you are not, is certainly idealistic, in the best sense of being guided by ideals and ethical principals, and it is also a bit crazy, as el Saadawi suggests, but it's not, in my view, naïve or fantasmatic. I think it a rather impressive example of abolitionist radical thought in practice—a working out of an alternative to the social death sentence in the doing of the sentence, forging something else there in the crucible of its sustainability and reality. Urgent patience: abolitionist time is a way of being in the ongoing work of emancipation, a work never measured by legalistic pronouncements, a work that inevitably must take place while you're still confined. Prisoners who are abolitionist leaders inside, who model a respected political agency, have a disciplined patience and politeness unlike any other I know. Patience because, in order to master a time that's always trying to do you in, to make you its servant, you need the discipline to control your

reactions to the unending assaults on you. You need to cultivate a being in principled and durable in-difference to the regime's power. Politeness because, as formerly incarcerated Stephen Jones always says, to retain one's dignity and a communal humanity living in a crowded cage at gunpoint, regulated by the presumption that you are no better than you're being treated, it is essential to treat others with a courtesy that restores civility to the very place where by definition it has been withdrawn.¹²

More prisoners than we're lead to believe refuse the social death sentence, undertake the difficult work it entails and pay the costs of doing so, but increasingly the majority are incorporated into the regime's 'malevolence' (Frederick 2001, p. 76). When Gregory Frederick writes that he is 'one of the few men left behind the walls of New York prisons who are able and willing to give you a clear perspective of what these places are [and] what they're doing to you and your respective communities', he is sadly correct (2001, pp. 76-7). As imprisonment—increasingly permanent imprisonment—becomes the destiny of abandoned and 'surplus' populations, we, the non-imprisoned, become more and more dependent on the work it does for us in managing our putative right to a safe and prosperous future. This is a deeply sacrificial and immoral situation and it is also a dangerous one because such intolerance grotesquely deforms and deeply scars all of us.¹³ To avoid this haunted future, to eliminate the conditions that are producing it, we would do well to remember that social death is a relational idiom of power. It is as much, perhaps even more, for us than for 'them'. And in this, it is something we do that can and must be stopped.

Avery Gordon is a Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Visiting Faculty at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is the author of *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power and People* and *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, among other books and articles. She is the co-host of *No Alibis*, a weekly public affairs radio program on KCSB 91.9 FM Santa Barbara and the Keeper of the Hawthorne Archives. She divides her living time between France and the United States.

Notes

¹ I was invited by Adi Kuntsman and Debra Ferreday to give the keynote address at their June 2009 Symposium 'Haunted Futurities' held at the University of Manchester. These are my edited remarks. The first part contains material from the introduction to Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008).

² See Gordon (2011a), 'I'm already in a sort of tomb': A reply to Philip Scheffner's *The Halfmoon Files*.. See also Harun Farocki's recent video installation, *Immersion* (2009). Farocki filmed a session at the Institute for

Creative Technologies in California, a laboratory where military and university researchers use virtual reality technology to 'treat' post-traumatic stress suffered by soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The treatment involves the use of computer game simulation technology to turn the soldiers' experiences into video games they 'play'. As in the First World War, the purpose of the 'treatment' is to return the soldier to normalcy, i.e., to a condition in which he can fight and kill obediently. As Farocki renders it, the 'treatment' appears to be the application of a sophisticated psychological operation (PSYOP) on a growing and de-stabilizing influence in the military: soldiers who cannot kill and watch others be killed and who increasingly will not.

³ 'Every few years some people announce that socialism, finally, is dead. They then read the will and discover, unsurprisingly, that they are its sole lawful heirs. Socialists meanwhile carry on. All too often indeed we carry on regardless' (Williams 1989, p. 288).

⁴ For a longer version of this argument see Chapters 16, 17, 25 in Gordon, *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People* (2004).

⁵ See Haney, 'A Culture of Harm: Taming the Dynamics of Cruelty in Supermax Prisons' (2008) and *Reforming Punishment: Psychological Limits to the Pains of Imprisonment* (2006).

⁶ Material in this section is taken from Gordon, 'Methodologies of Imprisonment' (2008); and Gordon, 'The Prisoner's Curse' (2010).

⁷ Fostering life by disallowing it is what Ruth Wilson Gilmore, myself and others call 'abandonment'.

⁸ I'm using the word 'prisoner' in the British sense of the accused—by state or crown—because the constitutional power is applied to the condition of imprisonment, not to the convict. Conviction, in fact, is no longer necessary. Captivity itself confers a legally binding judgment of pre-established criminal status, as the condition of the prisoners of the war on terror amply demonstrate.

⁹ For a brilliant and complex analysis of social death, race and the law, see Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (2011).

¹⁰ Although the men's discussion of 'doing time' is generated by their reading of French phenomenological psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski's book *Lived Time* (1933)—the reading Leder assigned for class—it reflects more aptly on Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. This may in part be the result of Leder starting the discussion not by asking how they do the time but by asking: 'Where do prisoners live? In the present, the past, or the future?' The present is always the 'most painful', thus the need to master it; the past the origin of their present circumstances (so they're told) or what was better than the present; the future is what they must make in this mix.

¹¹ Many examples of this redemption of time are found in Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's two films about Khiam prison in southern Lebanon, *Khiam 2000-2007* (2008).

¹² Formerly incarcerated is the term by which Jones prefers to describe himself. See Gordon, 'Seize the Time: An Interview with Stephen Jones' (2011b).

¹³ I'm using the word intolerance as Deleuze did when he made the following statement to Michel Foucault: 'There's no denying that our social system is *totally without tolerance*; this accounts for its extreme fragility in all its aspects and also its need for a global form of repression' (in Foucault 1972, p. 209).

References

bandele, a 2000, *The prisoner's wife: a memoir*, Washington Square Press, New York.

Berger, J 2008, *From A to X: a story in letters*, Verso, London.

Dayan, C 2011, *The law is a white dog: how legal rituals make and unmake persons*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

de Giorgi, A 2006, *Rethinking the political economy of punishment*, Ashgate, Surrey.

Derrida, J 1999, 'Marx & sons', in M Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly demarcations: a symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, Verso, London.

el Saadawi, N 1986, *Memoirs from the women's prison*, trans. M Booth, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Foucault, M 1972, 'Intellectuals and power: a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze', in DF Bouchard (ed.), DF Bouchard & S Simon (trans.), *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Frederick, G 2001, 'Prisoners as citizens', *Monthly Review*, vol. 53, no. 3, p. 85.

Galeano, E 1992 [1989], *The book of embraces*, trans. C Belfrage with M Schafer, W. W. Norton & Company, New York.

Gordon, AF 2011a, 'I'm already in a sort of tomb': A reply to Philip Scheffner's *The Halfmoon Files*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 1, Winter, pp. 121-54.

———2011b, 'Seize the time: an interview with Stephen Jones'. *Race & Class*, October.

—2010, 'The prisoner's curse', in H Gray & M Gomez-Barris (eds), *Toward a sociology of the trace*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

—2008a, *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination*, 2nd edn, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

—2008b, 'Methodologies of imprisonment', *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 3, pp. 651-8.

—2004, *Keeping good time: reflections on knowledge, power, and people*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder.

Haney, C 2008, 'A culture of harm: taming the dynamics of cruelty in supermax prisons', *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, vol. 35, pp. 956-84.

—2006, *Reforming punishment: psychological limits to the pains of imprisonment*, American Psychological Association Books, Washington D.C.

Jackson, G 1970, *Soledad brother: the prison letters of George Jackson*, Bantam Books, New York.

Leder, D, with Baxter, C, Brown, W, Chatman-Bey, T, Cowan, J, Green, M, Huffman, G, Johnson Jr., HB, Johnson, O, Jones III, A, Medley, M, 'Q', Thompson, D, Tillett, S, & Woodland, J 2000, *The soul knows no bars: inmates reflect on life, death, and hope*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham.

Marcos, S & Taibo II, PI 2006, *The uncomfortable dead (what's missing is missing)*, Akashic Books, New York.

Marcuse, H 1969, *An essay on liberation*, Beacon Press, Boston.

—1964, *One-dimensional man: studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, Beacon Press, Boston.

Negri, A 1999, 'The specter's smile', in M Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly demarcations: a symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, Verso, Brooklyn.

Patterson, O 1982, *Slavery and social death*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Rodriguez, D 2006, *Forced passages: imprisoned radical intellectuals and the U.S. prison regime*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Scott, JC 1992, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Williams, R 1989, 'Hesitations before socialism', in *Resources of hope*, Verso, Brooklyn.

© borderlands ejournal 2011