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ABOUT TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE JOURNAL

The *Transformative Justice Journal (TJJ)*, founded in 2012, is an online, open-source, peer-reviewed scholar-activist, anti-authoritarian, subversive, and critical penal abolition journal dedicated to promoting transformative justice. TJJ is organized and edited by a radical critical grass-roots collective of activist-scholars, community organizers, and current and former prisoners from around the world. TJJ was influenced out of conversations at the International Conference on Penal Abolition ICOPA in 2010. As a scholar-activist journal, TJJ was developed out of scholarly and community dialogues around promoting a decolonizing and anarchist criminology social justice penal abolition community-based alternatives to both the retributive, punitive, and utilitarian justice models used by most colonial criminal justice systems, which victimize offenders and re-victimize survivors of offenses, while promoting profits over people and corporate interests over community interests. The current punitive criminal justice system takes control, responsibility, healing, and accountability away from victims and offenders and instead gives them a powerless and victimizing experience. Transformative justice, a decolonizing and anti-oppression approach, however, views conflict not from the lens of the criminal justice system, but from the community; as such, those involved in the conflict are seen as individuals rather than victims or offenders. Moreover, transformative justice works to dismantle oppression by systems of domination, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, elitism, statism, classism, transphobia, ecocide, speciesism, and ableism within all domestic, interpersonal, global, and community conflicts that foster theories such as, but not limited to eugenics, capitalism, and colonialism. In short, transformative justice is restorative justice plus social justice. Transformative justice expands the social justice model, which challenges and identifies injustices, in order to create organized processes of addressing and ending those injustices and providing space and place for marginalized voices. Transformative justice also builds off the principles of, anarchism, decolonizing, prison abolition, healing justice, Quakerism, liberation, revolutionary social justice resistance movements, First Nations in Canada, and restorative justice in order to dismantle oppression, repression, suppression, and domination.

LOCATION

The Transformative Justice Journal is located in the Department of Criminal Justice at Salt Lake Community College.

Dr. Anthony J. Nocella II
Managing Editor
Department of Criminal Justice
Salt Lake Community College

Editorial Team

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Lea Lani Kinikini

Director, Institute for Research & Engaged Scholarship
University of Hawai‘i–West O‘ahu
transformativejusticejournal@gmail.com

Assistant Editor

Lucas Alan Dietsche

PhD Student IDSVA

Adjunct Professor

Adams State University

transformativejusticejournal@gmail.com

Managing Editor

Dr. Anthony J. Nocella II

Salt Lake Community College

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Please read these guidelines and then send your article, essay, review, research notes, interviews, reflections, poems, art, event summary, etc. to: transformativejusticejournal@gmail.com

Value and Uniqueness of TJJ

1. The Transformative Justice Journal was influenced in 2010 by discussions at the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA).
2. The *Transformative Justice Journal* publishes rigorously peer-reviewed scholar-activist work of the highest quality.
3. The *Transformative Justice Journal* provides the utmost respect and care during the review process.
4. The *Transformative Justice Journal* is a free-to-access electronic journal.
5. The *Transformative Justice Journal* charges no fees for publication.
6. The *Transformative Justice Journal* supports and encourages submissions that are excluded from mainstream journals, such as, but not limited to use photographic, video, MP3, art, poems, raps, and new media work.
7. The *Transformative Justice Journal* is organized and edited by a radical critical grass-roots collective of activist-scholars, community organizers, and current and former prisoners from around the world.

We Seek

1. **Incarcerated writings and art** – of any length
2. **Research articles and essays** – 2,000 to 10,000 words
3. **Student final papers** – no more than 10,000 words
4. **Course/class summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
5. **Research notes** – no more than 2,000 words
6. **Commentary** – no more than 2,000 words
7. **Tactic and strategy analysis** – no more than 10,000 words
8. **Academic development** – no more than 10,000 words
9. **Lecture/presentation summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
10. **Conference/panel summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
11. **Events/protests/resistances summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
12. **Action alert summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
13. **Film, book, art, and media reviews** – no more than 3,000 words
14. **Interviews and dialogues** – between 1,000 to 10,000 words
15. **Poems and rap** – no more than 10,000 words

Style

1. All submissions should have appropriate references and citations. Manuscripts should be single line spacing, 12-point font and conform to the [American Psychological Association](http://www.americanpsychological.org) (APA) style format.

2. Submissions must be sent in Microsoft Word format. Submissions in other software formats will not be reviewed.
3. Authors should remove all self-identification from their submissions, but all submissions must be accompanied by a title page with author(s) name and affiliation, name of type of submission (e.g., article, review, conference summary, etc.), contact information including e-mail, postal address, and phone number.
4. Authors must include an abstract of no more than 150 words that briefly describes the manuscript's contents.

Review Process

1. Upon acceptance for review, the Transformative Justice Journal editors will send manuscripts, under a double-peer reviewed process, to no less than two, and generally three reviewers. Reviewers provide their recommendations to the editor, who makes the final decision to accept the manuscript.
2. The Transformative Justice Journal holds to the utmost respect, love, and care when reviewing manuscripts. Each review we assure is constructive, positive, and hopefully useful to the author. We strongly welcome first time authors, students, nontraditional students, activists, youth, community organizers, prisoners, politicians, and teachers.

Submissions will be assigned to one of the four following categories:

1. Accept without revisions
2. Accept with editorial revisions
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4. Reject

Every effort will be made to inform authors of the editor's decision within 100 days of receipt of a manuscript. Authors, whose manuscripts are accepted for publication, will be asked to submit a brief biography that includes their institutional or organizational affiliations and their research interests. The Transformative Justice Journal only publishes original materials. Please do not submit manuscripts that are under review or previously published elsewhere.

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Publication Dates

1. TJJ uses a rolling submission process, allowing authors to submit at any time during the year without time restraints or quota of articles in an issue. Rolling submission, the most current scholarly method of accepting publications, allows for more timely publications and current scholarship to enter the public sphere in a more timely fashion, rather than conforming to traditional academic print journal guidelines.
2. We are pleased to accept your submissions at any time and will move quickly through the review process to ensure timeliness.
3. For submission, please submit to: transformativejusticejournal@gmail.com



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Carceral Psychogeography: Mapping Memory, Space, and Systems of Control Through Dérive

Author: Justin Gallant

Title: PhD Student

Institute: Institute for Doctoral Studies for Visual Arts

Address: 1305 Fitz Pl.

Redding, CA 96003

E-mail: jgallant@idsva.edu

Biography: Justin Gallant is a writer and theorist working at the intersection of transformative justice, fluid systems, and lived experience. Their work weaves together field-based philosophy, affective drift, and structural ethics. They are currently pursuing a PhD at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts.

Keywords: carceral psychogeography, Dérive, carceral terrain, space, system

Carceral Psychogeography: Mapping Memory, Space, and Systems of Control Through Dérive

Justin Gallant

Up to our knees in tears and blood of people who lived here/ and ran this town before it was a town / now it's an abomination / yesterday's plantation, today's prison / it's all in your head, because it's in the air. (Sole, 2024, *All in My Head*)

Introduction: Charting the Carceral Terrain

Incarceration is not just about being locked behind concrete walls or metal bars—it reverberates through landscapes, cultures, and personal histories, shaping how we move, feel, and remember. Rooted in colonialism and racial capitalism, modern carceral systems control far more than physical bodies; they also affect our collective consciousness and sense of place. In this work, I look at carceral psychogeography as a way to understand the different sites of confinement—including Ghana’s Cape Coast Slave Castle, Venice’s Holy See prison art exhibit, and California’s Folsom Prison—to engage with these locations, and how they shape and reflect the psychological underpinnings of mass incarceration.

Building on Guy Debord’s (1955/2006) notion of psychogeography, which studies how surroundings influence emotions and behaviors, I argue that these sites are heavy with carceral intent—even when they masquerade as tourist destinations or cultural landmarks. Debord’s idea of the *dérive*, a conscious drifting through urban spaces to uncover hidden power structures, guides our traversal of these “carceral” geographies. The *dérive* can be seen as the affective navigation of psychogeography as a practice. Meanwhile, Félix Guattari’s (1989/2013) schizoanalytic cartography deepens this approach by showing how power, identity, and place come together in tangled assemblages. Guattari reminds us that subjectivities are not fixed; they are formed through countless interactions with physical environments, ideologies, and subjective experiences.

To anchor these concepts, I draw on Pierre Nora’s (1989) discussion of *lieux de mémoire*—memory sites that both preserve and simplify the past (p. 9). Nora’s framework helps us see how spaces of confinement become emotionally charged backdrops where histories of oppression can be revisited or conveniently glossed over. Layered over this is Angela Davis’s (2003) abolitionist lens and Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) carceral geography, which both highlight the racial and economic dimensions of incarceration. Their work insists that none of these sites exist in isolation: they are woven into a global fabric of racialized control and exploitation.

By exploring Cape Coast Slave Castle, I trace how colonial powers normalized racial confinement and turned human lives into profit. Venice’s Holy See exhibition brings these logics up to date, transforming the prison into a striking spectacle that critiques incarceration while simultaneously commercializing it. Meanwhile, at Folsom Prison, paired with the Johnny Cash Trail, we see a nostalgic rebranding of confinement that all but conceals the realities of ongoing carceral violence. Together, these spaces unearth disturbing continuities in how society manages, markets, and metabolizes the notion of “undesirable” populations.

It is not enough to simply observe or learn about these places; we must confront the subtle and overt ways they exert control over our minds and communities. By revealing the psychogeographic threads that tie these sites together, I aim to show both the depth of carceral influence and the potential for resistance within those same spaces. As Angela Davis (2003) reminds us, “The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers” (p. 6). In the following pages, I investigate how these spaces—spread across continents and centuries—reinforce that systemic violence and consider how they might also be reclaimed for memory, reflection, and transformative change.

Embracing this trans-continental *dérive* means we wander through the layers of built environments, historical trauma, and cultural mythologies that sustain carceral systems. My hope is that this journey helps us better recognize these hidden logics—and perhaps, starts us down a path toward imagining and creating something radically different. From this paper to our brains straight to the shores of western Africa, our drift begins.

Cape Coast Slave Castle: Foundations of the Carceral Continuum

The Cape Coast Slave Castle in Ghana provides an unsettling yet essential starting point for understanding the carceral continuum. Marking the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, this fortress exemplifies how colonial powers formally introduced racialized captivity and profit-driven exploitation. Its haunting structures—marked by cramped dungeons and the infamous “Door of No Return”—not only robbed people of physical freedom, but also severed ties to identity, community, and selfhood. This castle thus emerges as a crucial node in the historical genealogy of confinement, illustrating how the logics of control and commodification persist across continents and eras.

Psychogeographic Disorientation and Rupture

Viewed through the aperture of psychogeography, the Cape Coast Slave Castle displays how space can be harnessed to alienate and dominate. As Debord (1955/2006) puts it, psychogeography examines “the specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (p. 8). Here, the castle’s design systematically disorients: its narrow passageways sever any sense of orientation, while the “Door of No Return” stands as a psychic and physical gateway into enslavement. Even for present-day visitors, wandering through these dungeons provokes a visceral collision of grief and fury, forcing them to confront physical remnants of centuries-old violence. Sometimes this violence embeds itself into the structure—one room, a holding area under a church, showed the excavations from archeologists leaving intact the cross-section of the floor with inches upon inches of human waste compacted into solid earth; thus, we were stepping on the “tears”, “blood”, excrement, and *bodies* of the incarcerated humans that inhabit this space. Consciousness is not always abstract. In this instance it is solidified in a *mélange* of memory as physical composition decaying and reconstituting itself as a floor for tourists.

Pierre Nora’s (1989) notion of *lieux de mémoire*—places of memory—helps tease out how the castle serves as both a record of human suffering and a site of contested narratives. Nora famously observes that these locations exist because “there are no longer... real environments of memory” (p. 7), illustrating the distance that now separates contemporary life from the histories these spaces contain. Today, the castle’s commodification as a tourist attraction carries its own contradictions: it packages the horrors of colonialism for global consumption, risking the flattening of lived experiences *back into* abstract historical episodes.

Assemblages of Power and Subjectivity

From a schizoanalytic cartography perspective (Guattari, 1989/2013), the castle functions as an assemblage that entwines territorial control, economic imperatives, and systemic power. It was a center for the buying and selling of enslaved Africans, embedding the ethos of commodification into its very blueprint. Barred cells, dark halls, and the forced routing of bodies reflect a larger machinery of dehumanization, turning people into mere tradable objects.

This dynamic aligns with Angela Davis’s (2003) observation that prisons—like slave castles—strive to render certain populations invisible, thereby excusing society from grappling with broader injustices. “Slave punishment was visibly gendered,” and similarly imprisonment today is thoroughly gendered (p. 28), Davis explains. The Cape Coast Slave Castle thus elucidates how racial and gendered dynamics structured the early architecture of captivity—dynamics that reverberate through contemporary carceral practices.

Memory and Resistance

Despite its oppressive legacy, the Cape Coast Slave Castle has also become a stage for acts of remembrance and reclamation. Local communities have revived ancestral rites, transforming the dungeons into places of spiritual honor. These ceremonies challenge the broader tourist-driven narrative, enabling African descendants to recover ownership of a history that was stolen and commercialized. Nora's (1989) theory of memory attaching itself to particular sites underscores why these rituals matter: they re-inscribe the castle's legacy with both sorrow and resilience. To the authenticity of these rituals, I can only say that one from my group was roped into handing over \$20 for some alcohol spit on him (he was white); another, an African American student, considered her experience highly spiritual.

Still, a thorny tension remains between resistance and commodification. The castle's reinvention as a tourist hotspot echoes today's patterns of carceral commodification, where sites of imprisonment—from former slave forts to modern prisons—are rebranded for public consumption. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) identifies a similar phenomenon, noting that prison expansion has been a geographical solution to socio-economic problems “by extensively and repeatedly removing people... and depositing them somewhere else” (p. 14). In other words, what began as a means of consolidating colonial power at Cape Coast persists in new forms whenever marginalized communities are warehoused, whether for profit or convenience.

Linking Past and Present

By setting the historical precedent at Cape Coast, we see more clearly how modern carceral systems echo long-standing frameworks of racial capitalism and hierarchical control. Angela Davis (2003) insists that current imprisonment structures are extensions—rather than merely successors—of slavery. The architecture, tourism, and ongoing spiritual reclamations at Cape Coast expose how confinement is embedded in both collective memory and physical spaces. Moreover, they bequeath us the interplay of subjectivity and environment described by Debord and Guattari: the castle's design manipulated enslaved Africans' emotions and sense of belonging, just as it shapes visitors' perceptions today.

Together, Debord's psychogeography and Guattari's schizoanalytic lens help unravel the Cape Coast Slave Castle's dual identity as a mechanism of oppression and a potential catalyst for resistance. Far from being a static historical relic, this structure still exerts its influence on how we think about—and practice—confinement. Consequently, it sets the stage for exploring how these carceral logics continue to unfold and adapt, whether through artistic presentations in Venice or nostalgic rebrandings in Folsom, California.

Intertextual Analysis: Mapping Power and Subjectivity

Both Guy Debord's (1955/2006) psychogeography and Félix Guattari's (1989/2013) schizoanalytic cartography dig into how our surroundings shape not just our behaviors, but our very sense of self. Debord strategizes how the layout and ambiance of any space—especially urban ones—can quietly direct our feelings and actions. He insists that what might appear neutral or purely functional in the environment often contains subtle cues designed to reinforce certain social dynamics.

Building on that, Guattari (1989/2013) stretches this focus from mere spatial effects to the production of subjectivities. He argues that material sites, social forces, economic motives, and ideological constructs do not just influence us; they merge into “assemblages” that actually create

what we call identity (27). These assemblages, composed of social, technical, and symbolic elements, work together to keep certain power structures in place, while making others feel “natural” or even invisible.

Thinking about carceral spaces in this light, it becomes easier to see how places like the Cape Coast Slave Castle are not just remnants of a brutal past. They are also living examples of how space, power, and consciousness interact to keep oppressive systems alive. For instance, Debord’s emphasis on the emotional pull of a physical setting illuminates how the architecture of a dungeon or the caged corridor of a prison can produce a visceral sense of entrapment. Meanwhile, Guattari’s concept of assemblages explains how economic profit, racist ideologies, and state power all interlock to shape not only physical design but also cultural narratives that justify confinement.

When we shift from Cape Coast to Venice or Folsom, the same patterns echo. The Holy See exhibit in Venice transforms a functioning prison into a curated art experience, which might feel like a commentary on

surveillance and control but still relies on the prison’s inherent power structures. In Folsom, an idyllic trail merges nostalgic storytelling with the cold reality of the prison looming in the background. In each place, space is never just space; it is an active participant in shaping who we think we are and how we perceive the people “locked away.”

By looking through these frameworks in tandem, we see a shared mission: to reveal how environments encode power and to imagine new ways of moving through—or even dismantling—those environments. In doing so, we begin to grasp that these carceral sites operate as more than historic or aesthetic curiosities. They are cogs in a much larger machine of control, intimately tied to how communities, identities, and economies are organized.

From the coasts of Ghana we set out down the road, forming the first pathway of the psychogeographical carcel continuum to Venice’s Holy See, where the prison-turned-art-exhibit shows just how muddled the line between critique and complicity can become.

Venice: The Holy See Exhibit – Spectacle, Art, and Surveillance

We turn a corner and hop a ledge going up Canal Street—the street’s name read on the sign morphs into an actual canal, and we board a vaporetto en route to Venice’s Holy See. The city’s labyrinthine waterways are the undertones to our drift, echoing the psychogeographic pull that guided us from Cape Coast’s coastal fortress into a new site of carceral spectacle.

Entering the Exhibit: A Choreographed Dérive

The Holy See, housed within a functioning women’s prison, immediately destabilizes any illusion of neutral space. Visitors are instructed to relinquish their passports and submit to security protocols. This ritual—mirroring a prisoner’s initial processing—underlines how freedom and confinement can be altered or performed in the blink of an eye. In Guy Debord’s (1955/2006) words, it is a space “consciously organized” to provoke emotional and behavioral responses (p. 8). As we move through corridors that blend art installations with glimpses of institutional routine, our reactions oscillate between empathy and unease.

Central to this experience is a fluorescent “eye”—a work by the artist Claire Fontaine—that hangs ominously, crossing itself out while simultaneously surveilling the exhibit. It recalls Michel Foucault’s (1995) description of the panopticon, where “visibility is a trap” (p. 151). Though we may momentarily feel we are stepping into a subversive critique of carceral power, the

fact remains: we are in a facility whose primary function is to confine. The performance of protest here, ironically, depends on the prison's very architecture.

The Spectacle and Its Contradictions

Debord's (1967/2014) broader critique of the "spectacle" resonates powerfully in this hybrid space. As he observes, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (p. 2). The Holy See's curated blend of prison tours, art installations, and guided narratives can feel like a commodity for cultural consumption—an immersive show, rather than a penetrating interrogation of incarceration. This points to a central tension: by drawing attention to the system, the exhibit also risks turning suffering into an aesthetic object for visitors to briefly inhabit, then leave behind.

If we recall the words of Angela Davis (2003), "The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited" (p. 6), this site conveniently offloads the responsibility of confronting deeper systemic issues. Even when a prison doubles as an art gallery, it can still reinforce that abstraction. Visitors might come away moved by a unique experience yet fail to reckon with the larger forces—racism, economic exploitation, and, particularly for this exhibit, patriarchy—that feed mass incarceration.

Psychogeography Meets Art and Agency

If we apply Félix Guattari's (1989/2013) notion of schizoanalytic cartography, the Holy See can be mapped as a complex assemblage of power, creativity, and contested agency. On the one hand, the formal exhibit and guided tours impose a narrative that visitors are expected to consume. On the other, incarcerated women who serve as de facto "docents" (or temporary tour guides) provide glimpses of authentic, lived realities inside these walls. Their voices—highlighting everything from personal stories to systemic injustices—disrupt the neat packaging of incarceration as cultural product.

In this sense, the Holy See walks a fine line between complicity and critique. It is an institutional site that momentarily offers a platform for the very people it confines. But even that opportunity is tethered to the prison's policies, the exhibit's schedule, and the gaze of outsiders looking in. For the women inside, the possibility of agency unfolds under watchful supervision—an object lesson in how subjectivities are shaped by overlapping constraints of space, policy, and social perception.

Tensions of Memory and Erasure

Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire*—places where memory clings or is actively created—helps us understand the Holy See as a paradoxical memorial in the making. The exhibit intends to document and critique mass incarceration; at the same time, it must navigate the institutional impetus toward containment and control. The women's stories are elevated, yet still contained by the structure that confines them. Their words become part of an "experience" for visitors, who may admire the courage on display without fully grasping the ongoing harm.

This dynamic raises tough questions about how we memorialize and critique living systems of oppression. We are not simply visiting a museum that recalls a past atrocity; we are peering into a present-tense mechanism of state violence. As Davis (2003) asserts, "Forward-looking... organizing strategies should recognize that the deeply gendered character of punishment both

reflects and further entrenches the gendered structure of larger society” (p. 25). Was my gaze also implicit in this structure? Rarely are AMAB visitors walking the courtyards amongst the women who inhabit the prison. The Holy See forces us to see the continuity between historical and contemporary modes of oppression, yet the interplay of commerce, art, and spectacle can blur rather than clarify those links.

The Drift Continues

Stepping back into the canal-lined alleys of Venice after the tour, we might feel a paradoxical lightness—like we are returning to “freedom.” Yet the weight of what we have witnessed lingers, coloring our perception of the water and architecture around us. Lest we forget the exhibit’s stark reminder: the prison we just toured is not a relic of the past but a living institution. Psychogeographically speaking, our *dérive* through the Holy See traces the thin line between engagement and commodification. This tension outlines the core of psychogeographic *dérive*: once you glimpse how space and power are fused, even the simplest act of moving from point A to point B can become a reflective, and sometimes unsettling, journey.

Spurred by the Holy See’s contradictions, we wander onward—continuing our circuit across carceral landscapes—and prepare to follow the subtle currents leading us to Folsom Prison. There, an entirely different convergence of natural beauty and institutional power waits to test the boundaries between memory and commodification.

Folsom Prison and the Johnny Cash Trail: Nostalgia, Nature, and Carceral Aesthetics

Drifting away from Venice’s intricate canals and storied prisons, we land in Folsom, California—a starkly different setting where pastoral scenery and institutional authority collide. Here, the Johnny Cash Trail reimagines Folsom Prison as both a cultural landmark and a nostalgic tribute to country music lore, enveloping visitors in a landscape that seems worlds apart from the grim realities of confinement.

Quiet Paths, Looming Walls

On the surface, the Johnny Cash Trail appears idyllic. Biking and walking paths wind through green terrain, deer graze along the edges, and the air feels open and free. Yet, as visitors approach the prison gates, any sense of boundless space is abruptly curtailed. Guards carefully monitor who comes near, reminding those passing by that Folsom’s carceral presence remains robust, no matter how playfully it has been dressed up.

In one personal moment, I paused to snap a photo near the facility entrance and was quickly confronted by corrections officers. Their swift intervention ingrained in me how thoroughly surveillance and control persist here, even in a venue marketed as a family-friendly destination. That small clash mirrored the unspoken tension throughout the trail: am I traversing a scenic route, or am I tracing the perimeter of an active carceral machine?

Psychogeography and the Trails of Memory

Reading this space through Guy Debord's (1955/2006) language of psychogeography, the Johnny Cash Trail manipulates the emotional register of visitors by pairing natural beauty with an ever-present fortress. Debord's notion that environments are "consciously organized" to evoke specific responses comes to fruition (p. 8). Passing interpretive signs and friendly signage about Johnny Cash's legendary concert might lull us into a cozy nostalgia—while in the near distance, razor wire lines a tall perimeter fence.

Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of lieux de mémoire structures the ephemeral idea of the trail. Folsom Prison is immortalized as the setting for Johnny Cash's famous 1968 performance, but that rosy cultural memory can overshadow the very real histories of violence, isolation, and exploitation that continue within its walls. Nora suggests this tension creates a "brutal realization of the difference between real memory... and history... This conquest and eradication of memory by history" has real effects on the individual (p. 8). The trail's aesthetic narrative simplifies complex truths, packaging them into a scenic "experience." Like other memory sites, Folsom becomes a commodity—this time trading on the mingled romance of outlaw country music and American can-do spirit.

The Nostalgic Spectacle

In many ways, Folsom showcases the "spectacle" Debord (1967/2014) critiques—a mode of perception that substitutes genuine engagement with stylized representations (p. 11). Through gift shops, museum exhibits, and trail signage, the prison is reframed as an iconic cultural institution, its daily function obscured by tourist-friendly branding.

Meanwhile, the actual experiences of incarcerated people remain hidden, neatly cordoned off from societal scrutiny. Folsom may be storied for its musical legacy and scenic vistas, but it quietly continues to cage those deemed disposable within the larger system of mass incarceration. That dissonance—between the nostalgic veneer and a grim reality—defines the psychic whiplash visitors confront.

Assembling Confinement and Commerce

Viewed through Félix Guattari's (1989/2013) schizoanalytic cartography, this site is an assemblage of natural splendor, nostalgic mythology, and state violence. The scenic trails, historical markers, and rustic atmosphere are not mere décor: they play an active role in shaping how people interpret the prison. By recasting Folsom as a piece of Americana, the systemic injustices underpinning incarceration can be downplayed, if not entirely erased.

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) reminds us, prisons often materialize as "geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis" (p. 26). In Folsom's case, the prison was once a literal source of local industry and remains a site of employment, feeding the local economy even as it imprisons thousands. The trail, in turn, boosts tourism, intertwining commodification with confinement. The politicians pat themselves on the back, and as our focus shifts, we see them 25 miles away in Sacramento listening to Johnny Cash while doing cocaine; onward, we "walk the line" of the trail.

Unmasking Harm, Imagining Alternatives

Navigating the Johnny Cash Trail can spark discomfort precisely because it flirts so closely with normalizing incarceration. We walk, jog, or bike through serene vistas, yet an undercurrent of carceral power runs beneath it all. This uneasy blend of freedom and captivity invites us to ask: does memorializing Johnny Cash’s rebellious spirit obscure present-day suffering? How do we square an uplifting story of music’s power with a system that exacts daily violence on those inside?

Lyrics from Rent Strike’s (2024) *Escape from Möbius Strip Mall, Pt. 2* cut through this tension: “Break the manacles / Open the prison doors / Let all upon the Earth go free again.” These words jolt the mind into imagining a more radical alternative—one not satisfied with a scenic stroll, but determined to dismantle the entire edifice of confinement. Angela Davis (2003) insists that genuine abolition means the “creation of new institutions that lay claim to the space now occupied by the prison... we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformation of many aspects of our society”, not just questioning or halfheartedly reforming the old ones (pp. 46-47). Standing at the intersection of mountain views and barbed wire, the question becomes: can we move beyond the mesmerizing allure of nostalgia and into the messy work of transformative justice?

Ultimately, the Folsom site poses a challenge to each of us: to see and name the dissonance, to sense how easily memory and marketing can smooth over unresolved social harms. And so our *dérive* continues, stirred by these incongruities of scenic calm and structural violence, pushing us to reconsider how we map our collective histories and future paths toward freedom.

Synthesis and Reflection: Memory, Commodification, and the Carceral Continuum

Departing from Folsom’s layered terrain, we look back on the sites we have traversed—the Cape Coast Slave Castle, Venice’s Holy See, and Folsom Prison—each exposing different faces of a carceral continuum that stretches across oceans and centuries. What emerges is a persistent logic of control, deeply entwined with racial, economic, and cultural power, permeating both the architecture of prisons and the narratives that circulate around them.

Carceral Continuity: Bridging Past and Present

From Ghana’s dungeons that once fed the transatlantic slave trade, to Venice’s prison-art hybrid, to Folsom’s nostalgic tourist trail, these spaces share more than a history of incarceration. They inhabit a historical throughline in which systems of confinement adapt to fresh contexts yet retain their core function: the containment and erasure of certain populations. As Angela Davis (2003) argues, “...we will reach the conclusion that enormous numbers of people are in prison because they are, for example, black, Chicano, Vietnamese, Native America or poor, regardless of their ethnic background” (p. 49). What began under colonial rule as forced labor and racial subjugation survives today in mass incarceration, extended by global economic interests that uphold the prison-industrial complex.

Memory and Erasure

Across these sites, we see Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of lieux de mémoire at work: places that not only preserve but also reshape our collective sense of history. At Cape Coast, commodified tourism can flatten the violent reality that once permeated the "Door of No Return." In Venice, incarceration transforms into a cultural spectacle, potentially sacrificing depth for aesthetics. At Folsom, the memory of Johnny Cash's performance rebrands the prison with rebellious romance, drifting attention away from the day-to-day suffering that persists.

These examples expand on how easy it is for spaces of harm to become seamlessly incorporated into popular narratives that dilute or even distort their deeper structural violence. When memory is packaged for consumption, it risks becoming a decorative nod to the past rather than a springboard for confronting ongoing injustices.

Psychogeography, Schizoanalytic Cartography, and Resistance

By following Guy Debord's psychogeographic insights, we perceive how environments shape and channel our emotional and physical movements. Each of these sites is carefully choreographed—whether through dungeons, guided tours, or scenic trails—to evoke reactions that may obscure or rationalize the real workings of carceral power.

In tandem, Félix Guattari's (1989/2013) schizoanalytic cartography calculates how diverse elements—economic interests, political ideologies, social norms—converge in assemblages that perpetuate control. The "machinic" side of this means prisons, or even prison-like spaces, become engines of profit and labor, normalizing an otherwise extraordinary system of confinement. While Cape Coast commercializes its gruesome history and Venice fuses incarceration with an art experience, Folsom capitalizes on nostalgic Americana. In each location, these assemblages can quell deeper critiques in favor of curated, consumable versions of resistance or memory. Now, Guattari joins our *dérive*, "...from the moment that such scenic dis-positions, or dis-positions of territorialization, start to overflow my immediate environment and engage procedures of memory and cognition, I find myself tributary to an Assemblage of enunciation with multiple heads" (pp. 205-206). In other words, (I rush to explain for Guattari), these spaces, or flows, are not just passive containers of history but active enunciators of power, shaping how memory, cognition, and territorial control intersect within larger ideological frameworks.

Yet possibilities for resistance persist: at Cape Coast, spiritual ceremonies reclaim a history of stolen dignity; in Venice, incarcerated women lend authenticity to artful critiques; in Folsom, the stark dissonance between pastoral calm and razor wire might spur visitors to question the sanitized narrative. Throughout, Angela Davis's (2003) abolitionist perspective remains a formidable source for resistance, pushing us to see beyond reformist tweaks toward the foundational dismantling of oppressive architectures.

Commodification of Confinement

The thread tying these case studies together is the steady commodification of carceral spaces, where sites of historical or present-day confinement are packaged as tourist destinations, cultural events, or feel-good curiosities. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) notes that modern prisons often surface as "geographical solutions" to socio-economic crises (p. 26), and these "institutions are sets of hierarchical relationships (structures) that persist across time" (p. 28). This logic extends into the cultural realm: states or private interests profit not only from building and operating

prisons, but also from curating their images for public consumption—be it through travel guides, art exhibits, or nostalgic homages.

This dynamic is problematic because it can deflect genuine challenges to the system. Rather than confront how prisons perpetuate racial capitalism and social stratification, commodified versions of these sites can suggest that reflection itself—like visiting a former slave castle or a prison tour—is sufficient engagement. In the process, deeper systemic critiques may fade into the background, replaced by souvenir snapshots and fleeting moral epiphanies.

Beyond Passive Engagement

Revisiting Debord's (1955/2006) *dérive*, we recall that psychogeography involves an active exploration that resists established patterns of movement and thought. By letting the environment's hidden circuits of power direct our awareness, we become more adept at identifying how space manipulates and is manipulated. This coloring calls us to move from passive observers to active disruptors of carceral logics—asking pointed questions, refusing sanitized narratives, and imagining alternate uses of these spaces that might promote healing and justice.

Moreover, Guattari's emphasis on reconfiguring subjectivities within these assemblages opens the door to collective transformation. If prisons reflect and reinforce certain ideologies—racism, patriarchy, profit over people—then dismantling those ideologies in the broader social field requires us to rethink how spaces are built, narrated, and circulated. Guattari (1989/2013) believes these assemblages “functions as a refrain of capitalist normalization... but there also exist complex affects, inaugurating irreversible diachronic ruptures” (p. 208). These ruptures offer us something tangible to hold on to through our wandering.

Drifting Toward Abolition

From Cape Coast to Venice to Folsom, each example enunciates that the architecture, culture, and mythology of incarceration do not exist in a vacuum. Angela Davis (2003) implores us to “imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society” (p. 46). That constellation, seen through the *dérive*, might involve spiritual reclamations in old dungeons, direct involvement of incarcerated voices in shaping public memory, and re-envisioning the land and resources now bound up in prisons. That is also clearly not enough.

Our journey, though figurative, demonstrates the staying power of carceral logics—and the creativity required to unravel them. As we make our way through these landscapes of surveillance, commodification, and silent suffering, the *dérive* becomes a metaphor for seeking out unmarked paths toward transformative justice. Rather than accept the script that prisons are inevitable or justified, we can explore new ways of living in relation to space, memory, and each other.

Having woven through these sites, we stand at a crossroads where memory, commodification, and abolition converge. As this drifting concludes, let us begin by turning these insights into a call for reimagining both carceral spaces and the narratives that sustain them—asking whether we might, in the words of Rent Strike (2024), truly “break the manacles” and envision a world “where all upon the Earth go free again.”

Conclusion: Toward Transformative Justice

Our *dérive*—from the dungeons of Cape Coast to Venice’s prison-turned-art exhibit, and finally to the nostalgic trails encircling Folsom—unravels how incarceration is simultaneously timeless and ever-evolving. These carceral landscapes echo through history, shaping collective memory even as they obscure the brutalities of confinement. Angela Davis (2003) reminds us that the prison’s true power lies in its ability to transform human suffering into an abstract problem—something we can walk away from, reflecting momentarily but rarely engaging in sustained efforts to dismantle the system itself.

Yet each of these sites also holds sparks of resistance. At Cape Coast, rituals that honor ancestral spirits stand against the tide of commodified tours. In Venice, the voices of incarcerated women pierce through the art exhibit’s curated spectacle. Along Folsom’s pastoral paths, the close proximity of razor wire and armed guards shatters any illusion of seamless nostalgia. Across these places, we see how memory, spectacle, and commerce converge to sustain systemic confinement—and how, in turn, these very sites can be reclaimed for deeper reckoning and collective healing.

Guy Debord’s notion of the *dérive* reminds us that our physical and mental routes through these spaces are never neutral: each environment is carefully orchestrated to evoke certain responses. By recognizing these hidden pathways of power, we move closer to Félix Guattari’s call for reimagining how subjectivities are produced within oppressive assemblages. If architecture, cultural narratives, and economic interests all intertwine to reinforce carceral systems, then any abolitionist approach must also grapple with reshaping our communal imagination of these places.

Angela Davis (2003) insists, regarding these systemic curations that exist as relations, that “the most effective abolitionist strategies will contest these relationships and propose alternatives that pull them apart” (p. 46). That charge resonates whether we are confronting the painful legacy of a slave fort or the modern glamor of a prison-turned-spectacle. Ultimately, truly confronting these sites requires refusing sanitized narratives and insisting on full engagement with the lived realities of those most affected by incarceration.

The *dérive*, then, becomes a metaphor for refusing to walk the paths laid out for us—tourist-friendly, artfully curated, historically glossed over “tears” “blood” and *bodies*—and instead forging our own, more clarifying routes. By doing so, we begin to peel back the layers that have normalized captivity in the social psyche. What remains is the possibility of transforming carceral spaces into loci of memory, reflection, and, finally, meaningful change. This psychogeographic drift challenges us to end our journey not with a simple acknowledgment of injustice but with a collective vow to act. By confronting the uncomfortable entanglements of memory, commodification, and control, we move closer to a transformative justice that does not require more bars, more walls, or more spectacle—only a shared commitment to freedom and collective care.

Addendum: Ushuaia and the Commodification of Incarceration

My carceral *dérive* picked up again, outside the appearance of linear time, in Ushuaia, Argentina—the southernmost city in the world—which embodies a strange and unsettling relationship with its own carceral past. Once home to one of Argentina’s most notorious penal colonies, the city now markets its prison history as a spectacle, commodifying incarceration for tourist consumption. The prison, which once confined political dissidents and violent offenders

alike, has been transformed into a dual-purpose site: a **Prison Museum** and a **Naval Museum**, intertwining state punishment with national maritime history in a way that obscures the realities of confinement and state violence.

Walking through Ushuaia, the echoes of its prison past do not carry the weight of historical trauma but instead are packaged as kitsch. Shops across the city sell old-style prison uniforms—including ones for babies, reducing the carceral experience to a novelty item. A tourist shuttle bus, complete with a mannequin prisoner and guard affixed to the back, parades through the town's streets, turning incarceration into an attraction, rather than a moment of reflection. At the End of the World Train Station, where tourists board a steam train that follows the path prisoners once took to Tierra del Fuego, performers in vintage prison uniforms pose for photos—for a fee—further solidifying this penal history as an aestheticized experience rather than a site of memory.

The psychogeographic experience of Ushuaia is strikingly different from that of Ghana's Cape Coast Slave Castle or Venice's *Holy See* exhibit. While those sites attempt—however imperfectly—to grapple with their histories of human suffering, Ushuaia seems to revel in its carceral past as a source of entertainment. This aligns with Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of lieux de mémoire, where sites of memory are less about lived experience and more about curated, selective history. The Ushuaia prison does not challenge Argentina's penal legacy but absorbs it into a palatable, consumable narrative that fuels the tourism economy.

This bizarre celebration of incarceration raises important questions about the spectacle of punishment in the neoliberal era. The commercialization of prison history in Ushuaia reflects Guy Debord's (1967/2014) critique of the spectacle, where historical reality is transformed into image, spectacle, and commodity. The same structures of discipline that once controlled prisoners' bodies now control public memory, transforming sites of suffering into sanitized, nostalgic attractions. If, as Angela Davis (2003) argues, the prison functions ideologically to obscure the realities of systemic oppression (p. 44), then Ushuaia represents a perfected version of this function: the prison has not only been erased from contemporary political consciousness but has been repackaged as a tourist attraction, ensuring that its underlying carceral logic remains unquestioned.

While sites like Cape Coast and Folsom Prison at least attempt to navigate the contradictions of memorializing confinement, Ushuaia appears uninterested in these tensions. Instead, it fully embraces the transformation of carceral history into spectacle, allowing visitors to participate in the simulation of incarceration while remaining comfortably removed from its material consequences. This raises a critical question: When does the act of remembering slip into the act of consuming? And what happens when the prison, once designed to remove individuals from society, is repurposed as an amusement for those who move freely?

Ushuaia forces us to confront the ways in which incarceration is aestheticized and trivialized in the global imaginary. It reminds us that the prison does not need to exist as a functioning site of confinement to retain its ideological power—it merely needs to be remembered in the right way, packaged for the right audience, and made available at the right price.

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Burn the White Flag

Author(s): Daniel A. Wilson Raj

Title: incarcerated person

Institution: MSOP

Address: 1111 Highway 73. Moose Lake, MN, 55767

E-mail: N/A

Biography: Burn the White Flag is a true resistance song. The song was written by political prisoners detained at the Shadow Prison in Minnesota. Not only does the song's lyrics talk about resistance, the song itself is a demonstration of resistance.

Keywords: Transformative Justice, Minnesota Sex Offender Program, Minnesota, Shadow prison

Burn the White Flag

Daniel Wilson Raj

For the weak and for our kin.
we will fight until we win.
Till freedom rings.
Till Freedom rings.

Listen close to what we say.
And we will all go home one day.
If we stand in unity.
We will end MSOP.

And when we fight, we will sing.
In the face of suffering.
Out battle cry.

We raise our voices to the sky...
Burn the White Flag

Their dogma's dead, the blood they've shed.
now all i see is crimson red.
my mouth is dry. I rage inside.
Now let me hear your battle cry.

My racing thoughts are all I've got.
My heart pounds hard. Scars on my arm.
Don't forget the ones who've died
now let me hear your battle cry.

And when we fight, we will sing.
In the face of suffering.
Our battle cry, battle cry
We raise our voices to the sky...
Burn the White Flag
Now Let me see you Burn the White Flag

Their promises are only lies.
They haven't stopped a single crime.
Survivors are on our side.
Now let me hear your battle cry.

The Shadow Prison's the dark.
But we are here to be the spark.
Now let us see the fire inside.
and let us hear your battle cry.

We have fought for our freedom.
Blood and tears are all we known.
We need you to lift us up high
And let us hear your battle cry.

Let us know we're not alone
We can find a Clear Path home.
It's time to spread your wings and fly.
Now let us hear your battle cry...

Burn the White Flag
Now let me see you Burn the White Flag.
Burn the White Flag
Now Let me see you Burn the White Flag.



Volume 6, Issue 1, July 2025

“Circa: Pain Circa: Love”: Excerpts from *Under the World: A Collection of Addiction Related Non-Fictional Short Stories with Photography*

Author(s): Noah Benjamin Philips

Title: East Village Poet-Builder

Institution: N/A

Address: N/A

E-mail: drugwhispers@gmail.com

Biography: Noah Benjamin Phillips is a East Village New York mystic, philosopher, and poet.

“Circa:Pain Circa:Love” is cyclical prose from Philip’s days and nights wandering the New York City streets finding Education, Alleviation, Inspiration

Four Keywords: circa, pain, love, education

“Circa: Pain Circa: Love”

Excerpts from

Under the World:

A Collection of Addiction Related Non-Fictional Short Stories with Photography

(Circa 1996)

It could be anyone...

I didn't pick my outfit and I don't want to be here.

What makes you think I wasn't that kid who was nice to you in middle school? When you I needed a friend...

I never thought I would become homeless; I come from a middle class, 2 parent household, happy family; unhappy me. I was in therapy at an extremely young age, my kindergarten

The teacher told my parents I had anxiety issues. And all my drawings were of "scary" stuff.

I was always a good student though. Very good grades. Very socially awkward, kind hearted but

troubled kid. But I got bullied when I was too nice.

I'm not sure why I was so unhappy then I was little, my peers if I had to take a guess, luckily my The family was fine. I got picked on until I started taking out butcher knives from my moms kitchen

and chasing my bully's with them.

But then I was the creepy kid, nobody wanted to be around me, the popular unpopular crowd hung out with me and we drank sometimes. But I liked Vicodin better than drinking. I'd get them when I could be happy for a few hours...time flies.

Fast as shit if you let it.

...

Create from dirt, from death; find new beginnings; brand new things from the old and withered...

Create with what you have; even if what you have is almost nothing at all...make joy from the pain.

Keep going...write it out, make the page cry.

(Circa 1998)

I was 14 going on 15 when it happened...

I had a .25 caliber pistol pointed at me and a friend from 3 or 4 feet away, when we were hanging out once, on some street in Long Island.

It's around 9pm.

A grown man; not sure the exact age range but overweight; wearing a dark ski mask; a hooded bubble coat. It's not that cold out...and my friend says to him "what up money?"

My friend isn't that bright.

He stops in front of us, pulls the gun out.

Says to him, "Fuck you mean what up money?"

Aims it at us both as he cocks back the slide on the barrel, waits a few seconds, looks at us.

Smiles under his mask...I just stare into the barrel of his gun in silence; then puts it back inside his jacket and keeps walking down the quiet sidewalk, lit by a couple street lights.

The shock from it felt like a chill in my blood and a pain down the base of my spine.

I didn't tell anyone about it, not even my parents.

I did develop a relatively strong sense of intuition and a deeper awareness of the people around me in the following years.

(Circa 2011)

Sitting by the window of my mother's old sewing room that's an empty space waiting to be remodeled...glancing at the plain, green(ish) lawn outside. It's reflecting in patches against the twilighted sky, the broken wooden, picket fence, naturally colored, getting old...full of holes and Broken tips...

With my dope needles; seeing which one isn't clogged, so I can shoot the two small glassine baggies of heroin I just got.

I just learned how to shoot up, so I'm going in my upper wrist; where some veins were actually

visible... I get a shot after fiddling and trying a couple times; dripping blood a little down my arm;

I see the small drop of blood in the base of the syringe; light tan liquid, about 40cc worth of water and maybe .3 grams of extremely cut dope.

The small drop of blood in the base shoots up like a tiny, dancing red dragon as I pull the base of the plunger up then immediately push it in, trying really hard not to shake it and have it fall out of my vein.

The instantaneous effects hit me, right in my core; in early heroin addiction I'd still feel my shots; euphoria and excitement to get more; like a 12 year old birthday party gone well; smiling in my warm; itchy; fuzzy trance..

I remember when I was little; when this room was my mom's sewing room still, she used to give me drops of blood for my toy microscope; to look at her blood cells; she would prick her thumb with a sewing needle...

I'd wonder how she dealt with the pain;

It looked like it hurt and I was too scared to do it to myself...

My face turns to neutral expressions and the lawn leaves my sights with gone; emotionless Blinks.

(Circa 2013)

Larry the dust head is chasing me down a street by the train tracks, with a kitchen knife...

He's on PCP; I'm just coming down from the crack.

I'm still healing from the beating I got from our dealers last week; the ones he bought his dust from; the same ones I got my crack from.

I'm in the Hempstead bus terminal now, by the LIRR, asking people for \$1 for the bus; because I'm trying to get up \$30 for my 3 bag dope shot I'm about to really need soon; once I run out of these crumbs of crack that i've been taking smoke breaks with, every 5 minutes in the men's room.

I'm on the way back from my dope guy, going I'm not sure where because I have no place to go so I head to my mom's house, so I can break the restraining order she has, now...

I'm in a Nassau County police squad car, in the back seat.

The cuffs hurt; but I like pain;

It's ok...

I must like pain.

(Circa 2013)

I must have walked 200 blocks the first night I was homeless in Manhattan. It was warm out at at least...July I think.

My feet were in terrible pain, I limped when walked after about a week or so of constant walking or standing, until eventually, due to lack of another option, I got broken in.

Most of what I saw after all, during my periods spent living on the street was just that, the street. Bleak, empty at times, too crowded at others or just nobody who would talk to me about my problems or anything actually with anyone, anywhere but here...

..the sidewalks, scrolling by, on a one track, seemingly everlasting circle through a chunk of my time spent on Earth so far...

..and it is what it is.
I guess it's just gotta be.

(Circa NOW)

I used to believe, when I was in my adolescence, that I had so much love inside of me.
Probably other stuff too, yes, but love.
That's the word I picked to describe it.
As I saw that my love was not wanted or loved, yet, I ran out of hope. I decided that I was not to be loved.
So my love became some kind of hate instead.
Adolescent rage. And after I really felt the hate, came the drugs.
I did not love the hate, so I hated to feel this way, I needed more. More drugs.
So much more...with time comes change, more or less. Nothing short of miracles have made me able to sit here and realize that in actuality, I have recovered from the brain damage that was created by the drugs that I needed because of my inner, my outer hate, that was spawned from: not being accepted, my love, my wanting to love.
Didn't know the whole time I was the true love of my life...
The root is what?

(Circa 2018)

Walking down Collins Ave in South Beach Miami, it's maybe 2 or 3am. I'm just looking for some kind of money, or drugs.
I had no place ready in the real world, nobody to care about me but my family who I hadn't seen in years.
I pass by some old guy checking me out.
We go upstairs, he tells me he has no money.
I almost push him through the wall but I see the look on his face. He likes it. So I stop and walk right out...I think constantly about putting my head under the tire of a moving car, it's calling me.
An end to this nonsense.

So I walk back down Collins ave and go sit in front of the hostel and wait until daybreak so I can probably harass my family members over the phone for a Money gram to get a few bucks together for extra drug money.

Maybe an actual meal...real food?

Na.

Or maybe I'll go back on Grindr and tell someone who still cares that I'll chill naked with a limp dick if they smoke me up on their Crystal. I'll lie and tell them I'm gonna get hard and cum. And cum?

I got big decisions to make.

...

I can be funny and charming and charismatic but I know where my memories are.

I have only memories of what I can recall. My thoughts and opinions, beliefs about my physical reality and my ethereal life and nature, are what accompanies my memories.

If you feel alone, it's probably because you are by yourself and you need a change.

The mind creates inside your subjective reality and your surroundings can change. More importantly, you can change...in the womb in your mother, do you remember?

What is the first memory you have?

When is the worst moment you can remember?

And the best?

Where do you see your next best memories?

Avoid prolonged periods of staleness or destructive design.

Avoid the painful place...the place I've known as hell. I couldn't breathe there, couldn't see there... every minute was perceived like 6 hours.

I stayed for about 12 days.

My last loving relationship was my best recent memories...

Love...

I'm in love with myself, nowadays, it's great actually because I don't have space for anyone else's bad energy anymore, and we rarely ever fight.

I've worked out my addiction to hard drugs. And I'm working on the rest in baby steps...every day the same routine, eating healthy, studying, exercising and resting.

Meditating and reflecting and being grateful...

(Circa August 2020)

I leapt, headfirst, under the back tires of a moving truck, on Broadway & E.10th street in the East Village. It was summer; everyone was eating except me and other dirty homeless people sleeping outside; of course...

I felt so small; so meaningless; I was so lost. I had been actively planning it for about a month beforehand. Testing how fast trucks could stop by jumping in front of them a couple times...but with the front, they could see me and stop on a dime. So I realized I could go under the back tire, likely without them noticing and being able to stop on time.

I saw a little bird dying on the sidewalk a few days prior; face up it looked painful; so I hesitated a second before stomping on its head and body to crush it. I couldn't see it suffering; rainy grey day it was; nobody else would have noticed. I went and cried on a park bench...

I bummed a Newport 100 cigarette from a homeless guy sitting on a ledge by a closed cell phone store; and he smiled at me as I forced one back and walked to my planned fate. I tossed it. No point now...

I was about to crush my entire head off under the tire of a moving truck...I didn't want the train people to see it, and I didn't have access to a gun.

After dragging my feet a couple blocks, I found an intersection with nobody on my corner. The streets were quiet...about 10am. I wanted there to be minimal witnesses. I was just looking to

go.

I took a last second jump towards the tire and undercarriage of a passing 18 wheeler.

I was thrown by the trucks back tires, they were the last thing I could see, spinning towards my face. It took a buildup of courage, to be honest. It was going about 20mph.

I hit my face on the cement, and was left with 3 full jaw fractures, a crushed right cheekbone and painful whiplash that lasted 8 months or more. I also lost all the front teeth I had left. A plastic surgeon at Bellevue Hospital did my facial reconstruction.

The bones were real damaged. My face was in 4 or 5 pieces. I eventually got dentures. The

only flesh wounds were some road rash on my cheek. But luckily no big scars. However, my jawline is much narrower now and I have a new chin dimple.
Thank you, Doctor C.

(Circa 2014)

I'm looking around the dorm, I'm in the Bedford Atlantic Shelter I think it was a Saturday morning and I'm trying to see if anyone might have a clean needle.

My needle is clogged, I had my shot ready and everything and bam, it jams.

So I notice a guy a few beds over and across from me playing with something small and white looking in his hand, I go over to him and ask if he has any cleans. He says no, just dirties, but I'm desperate and I ask if he's clean.

He says "yea, I mean, last time I checked..."

I look at his face and think for a second before answering "Ok, yea then lemme get one."

I'm fixing up so is he, sitting on the edge of his bed, right there in the 50 man open dorm.

Then, two DHS officers (homeless services cops) walk by and I see them as I'm looking up, already looking at us.

The one says "Guys, just don't die ok?"

We both say "ok".

They keep walking.

We keep fixing.

...

I'm tired of hearing people talking about things that I'm pretty sure they know nothing about but they still insist; or say these absolute statements like they even know what it is - "to know".

...

Our energy, maybe, like a lost radio signal, flies through space once it leaves our body...dancing with the ions.

Death is subjective, I believe

There's slow deaths which might seem hellish or heavenly, depending on who or what.

Quick painless ones, turning reality into nothing.

Like it is to view the back of your neck with your own, front two eyes.

Right now...do it.

See?

No...

It's only sad if you feel that way.

(Circa 2016)

We're in the living room of the halfway house in Lake Worth FL.

It's me and another kid we lived with, Jared's been in the bathroom for too long we're wondering what's up with him then we hear a strange and unfamiliar, low rattling noise, coming from the bathroom. We knock on the door. No answer. So we look at each other; I twist the bathroom door handle to break it off to open the door which couldn't be kicked in because it opened the another way. It's a cheap door handle. I see him lying on the floor by the toilet, his face is turning blue, he's unconscious. I was recently certified in CPR, in the program to be a rehab worker. So

I use the technique I learned to get his tongue out of his airway. I give him mouth to mouth, with his snotty nose too and I slap him on the leg. He comes to. The EMS is on the way... I had flushed his empties, his needle and cottons and his cap, so he didn't get in trouble with the law. I was in early recovery too, so I'm just looking out for him. The EMS arrives a few minutes after he wakes up. He lies to the cops and medics about just being tired or something and on too much Gabapentin. They leave, he goes off to work and thanks the two of us.

...

Every single thing you will ever have to know is already embedded within you.

Everything you'll ever love is already inside you.

Everyone you've ever known is always with you, regardless.

Everything you need or want to realize is already waiting; only space and time between you.

(Circa 2020)

Staring at people all day, watching them on dates, getting food, laughing with friends, families

Eating at restaurants I couldn't afford, fantasizing about killing and eating them.

Grilling them over a garbage fire I guess.

I wasn't really sure I'd ever make it back from there: it was the end for me. It was New York City the summer of Covid, 20/20.

I was carrying around a notebook with scratchy writings and sketches, and lost it. Figured someone cared enough to pick it up so I felt good enough to smoke another joint clip I found on the ground with a \$1 lighter. Running out of fuel.

Trying to figure out where I can find something to kill myself with again. It's a lot of what's on my mind as I walk all day in myself, stuck.

I felt like I was going to explode I had so much bad; extremely painful emotions overwhelming me.

The Dr.'s kept telling me I was schizophrenic.

I wish the Empire State Building didn't have security on the roof; it's definitely tall enough...

...

Knowledge is the absorption of information; wisdom is the ability and experience putting

knowledge to use; wisdom held in high regard; is power.

...

(Circa 2022)

The taste left in my mouth, in my spirit...it's foul, it's bitter.

It comes from a place of grey, numbed pain that hurt too much so it just went numb and instead of fear now it's anger.

Rage.

Irrational negative feelings towards others and of course, the real worst excuse- myself. But; "It's all my fault" is an excuse.

If you're reading still then maybe you have had times which you relate to dark and uncontrollable emotions. I'm not experiencing these all day every day, it's funny...i'm pretty happy go lucky and inside too, most of the time nowadays.

But the transference of how I felt about how people were treating me, or not treating me back

when I had nothing; project my feelings about normal society that I developed out there onto others.

It's a shame, but I can't have any shame...

To feel how I do sometimes.

I need to keep writing, it's my other itchy thing, my oldest bad feelings outlet...

Outlets are a must.

Not turning it inside is a must and that includes lashing out on others and then reaping consequences that only hurt yourself.

In the end..it's all about you; because how could you ever help anyone else in that state of mind?

Just breathe, it gets so much better, sometimes it's just after it gets worse first.

...

It's funny how little the big things bother you when you're really in the thick of it, and living with an addiction. My feet smelled so bad at one point that I could even smell them in the cold, February Brooklyn wind. I'm unaware of how the rest of me smelled but when I was sleeping on the street with a dope habit, I would try to go warm up in bars and I'd usually be asked to leave because of hints at things like my ragged appearance, my odd, fidgety behavior or how I smelled.

I don't believe I ever really acted like I cared, about being 86'd from everywhere I tried to rest up in. I'd be cooperative almost polite about it like I missed society's inner circles as I lived on the fringe. Possibly why I built up so much resentment towards

"normal" people over the course of those years that I slept in public places or homeless shelters.

I felt like a ghost out there, invisible, still amongst you but not to be touched or looked at unless by mistake. Like; you wouldn't continue eye contact with me while I was homeless; or let me talk to you for more than a sentence before you just kept walking.

I needed a medium. I swear. It was that frustrating to be living, rather existing this way during Those years I had a lot of chaos in my mind and my body was sore, my soul was noticeably lost.

And after the crystal meth during the time period that I was mentally unwell and in and out of psych facilities and sleeping on the street again; I am still regaining confidence in myself. I still feel dirty after that last time, homeless. I wasn't even on drugs, it was how the drugs left me.

Like a feral animal, a small, rabid, feral animal.

It's surreal to think of, as I sit here now, in my bed even.

Just a ceiling is beautiful to me.

I'm beautiful to me, most importantly.

It was just how society looked at me while I abused myself.

Changed me, made me kinder but less willing to be patient with nonsense. But at the days end,

Could I really blame society? Life, in a sense and everything in it will generally put to you, what you put in you, what you put out.

Be careful what you say, be careful what you wish.

...

...

In an abyss, there lives a heart...

With more fire than blood and more hate than love. Wishing on a dream; but staying someplace else.

...

(Circa 2019-2021)

It was so hard to scratch an itch in the strait jacket.

Or in the 5 point restraints. I'd get restrained a lot in my early recovery from meth, in psych stays. Usually 2 week stays, about 20 different stays in more facilities than I remember which ones, starting in LA. I stripped naked once in the day room at the Woodhull Hospital psychiatric unit in Brooklyn and bit a staff member in his arm, drew blood. Loosened 3 of my front bottom teeth biting him. I lost those teeth a few weeks later. In a different psych holding unit I pulled them out myself, it hurt but I just screamed and pulled. I was tired of them wobbling while I ate.

I would get on the phone and call my ex girlfriend who I was still friends with and scream at her. I'm not sure why. I would watch the news and I would think that somehow the stories were related to me, like being made for me. I got along fine with the other patients, usually...

Take a look in the mirror some time and you might see a reflection of someone you know and Sometimes you might see someone you do not know, or know anymore at least. No matter what I'm going to keep on going, because if I don't then who will?

...

Honestly? Being a homeless drug addict; isn't very interesting; as an actual life, to live yourself. It's mostly just cold and boring or hot and boring. It's self esteem draining and infuriating, I spent most of my time when I didn't have really strong effective drugs to numb me, in not such a great mood. Staring at the clean people all day, my soul was empty but my mind and my body were full of hate. Like murder on my mind, suicide on my mind. Thinking, about cannibalism out of fear, repressed rage, powerlessness, spite, sheer psychosis and intense hunger pains. I know that street life, drug life, it can be easily romanticized but there is nothing sexy or beautiful about being cast away, like an obsolete computer.

Nothing. You don't feel like you need anything - aside from that drug.

But you do; you need love.

There's a void in us, people who become addicts.

It needs to be filled with self love; and self respect.

An understanding of who you are. It's sort of baby step, by step until you get closer to the dream we have when we're getting high like that, wasting and daydreaming away our lives It's the other parallel, the imagined life that you wish you were living. Your imagination is a parallel reality, as as far as i'm concerned. Because it can cause your reality to change.

In your mind, is your imagination...

And therein lies the key out of this dungeon.

Picture yourself in your preferred existence; which is still just a seed inside of your imagination.

If you can nurture that seed, that goal, do something for it daily, instead of killing it, it will grow.

When it grows into being your "real" existence because you've grown it from its infant state; you won't be in the miserable predicament you're in right now.

You can be living in your dream, the past darkness will just be in your mind...in your imagination.

Keep your reality as true to yourself as you can.

To truly destroy yourself; would truly be a shame.

...

(Circa 2022)

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It comes from a place of grey, numbed pain that hurt too much so it just went numb and instead of fear now it's anger.

Rage.

Irrational negative feelings towards others and of course, the real worst excuse- myself. But; "It's all my fault" is an excuse.

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It's a shame, but I can't have any shame...

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I need to keep writing, it's my other itchy thing, my oldest bad feelings outlet...

Outlets are a must.

Not turning it inside is a must and that includes lashing out on others and then reaping consequences that only hurt yourself.

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In the Killing Chamber

Author: Doran Larson

Title: Edward North Professor of Literature

Program: Hamilton College

Address: 198 College Hill Road

Clinton, NY 13323-1218.

E-mail: dlarson@hamilton.edu

Biography: Doran Larson led a writing workshop inside Attica Correctional Facility from 2006 to 2016 and has organized two college programs inside New York State Prisons. Author of *Witness in the Era of Mass Incarceration*, he is the editor of *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America*. He founded *The American Prison Writing Archive*, at prisonwitness.org. His new book, *Inside Knowledge: Incarcerated People on the Failures of the American Prison*, was published by NYU Press in January, 2024.

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In the Killing Chamber

Doran Larson

The Texas state death house in Huntsville is a squat brick building fronted by a few square yards of struggling grass and knee-high shrubs. Gleaming chain link surrounds a concrete ramp that rises to the door to accommodate shackled ankles. Most death row dwellers are housed an hour to the east, whereas the state death house shelters only the next nine in line to enter “the Killing Chamber”. The onsite cells are numbered one to nine. Their inhabitants move down after number one exits for the last time; then another is shipped into cell nine.

Everywhere in the Walls Unit and Huntsville’s four other prisons, the visual field is willfully dull: the faded grays and browns, brick and concrete that span prisons from Maine to Hawaii corral bodies into corridors and cells. Color is so successfully banished, writers inside report breaking into tears at the sight of a guard’s red handkerchief. As a man incarcerated in Ohio writes, prison is “an oatmeal world (...) Our lives, our activities, our thoughts, and our words, food, clothes, even the buildings and pavements themselves reflect this antiseptic eradication of pigment and hue...[c]oncrete and cinder blocks and bars meant to induce a prolonged mental coma” (Roberts, 2022). The Walls Unit’s exceptions are the brass bars at entry and (for most) at departure. And the killing chamber itself. Its block walls sport a greenish turquoise. In any hipster hotel, it would be chic.

I am crowded into this tight space with a clutch of academics. We are in Huntsville for the 2023 convening of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism at Sam Houston State University and this year’s theme is “Romanticism and Justice”. Organizers arranged the prison tour for anyone willing. The official conference start is in three hours. My peers and I breathe the aroma of nothing around a cruciform mattress that rises to waist level on a welded cruciform frame. To its right hand, one-way glass looms up to conceal where state officials will sit to observe. On the left, paired windows span the length of the room. These front the two viewing chambers, divided by another block wall: one side for family of the murder victim; one for those of the body strapped to canvas and steel. These parties never cross paths, never lay eyes on one another. Their power to speak, to hold accountable, to sorrow and to heal—things that many victims’ rights groups would prefer to killing—are sundered by cement block (Anderson, 2022). Seated in fixed rows, mothers and fathers, siblings and cousins and grandparents are referred to only as witnesses. Reduced to their capacity to see, they are severed by walls and glass from the stories that connect them to the body buckled to a cross, and thus to each other. Their legally mandated role is to verify that the state has carried out someone’s idea of justice.

The Supreme Court has declared lethal injection acceptably humane, yet straps and buckles cross arms and legs and torso—built for a struggle against the most commonly botched method of state-sponsored killing. The problem is unqualified staff. (By oath, no doctor or nurse can participate.) Unable to locate viable veins, this search can drag on for hours. In Alabama, failed executions led to adding more straps and extending the window for the procedure to thirty hours. One man, jabbed and bleeding like a living voodoo doll, turned to his witnesses: “Can you believe this?” (Cover, 1992).

In advance of papers on “Trans Spectrality in Maturin’s *Melmoth*,” and “Climate Instability and Climate Justice in Wordsworth,” I’ve been invited to give a talk on the history of writing by incarcerated Americans, including writers in cells today. From Patrick Lyon’s 1799 description of men attacked by rats and women raped at guards’ pleasure inside the first penitentiary experiment on Philadelphia’s Walnut Street, to Austin Reed’s 1859 expose of violently imposed industrial slavery in New York; Jack London reporting strong-arm survival tactics after a thirty-second trial for vagrancy in 1904, and Alexander Berkman’s (1912), Kate Richard O’Hare’s (1920), and an anonymous female convict’s (1934) reiteration of the deep Venn overlap between poverty and criminalization, then the inflection point of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), where the prison is anatomized as a vital organ of white supremacy—a message echoed by the Black intellectuals held at Joliet and Soledad, Attica and San Quentin in the 1960s and 1970s and detailed today by writers from Florida to Alaska.

My paper’s central thesis is straightforward: the consensus of writers who have documented over two and a quarter-centuries of incarceration in the US is that prisons simply do

not work. They never have. From their beginning, they have been this nation's master class in Three-card monte. Rather than deterring crime, prisons degrade prospects for employment, marriage, and community connections, making resisting crime harder despite reformed intentions. This has been the case since Philadelphia's Walnut Street Jail opened in 1790. Time inside doesn't rehabilitate. Reform occurs only due to the efforts of imprisoned people to resist the damage done to them. Prisons simply mete out generic pain for crimes from drug possession to murder, inspiring less remorse for lawbreaking than disdain for the law (Larson, 2024).

Our guide through Huntsville was a bandy-legged white man and the prison's assistant warden. As we crowded into the killing chamber, he crossed his arms as he leaned a vested shoulder against the threshold and explained: the names on the execution team are never made public. With something like a wink, he insinuates that one of those names may be his.

My talk at the conference was prefaced by an often-quoted passage from legal scholar Robert Cover:

Legal interpretive acts signal and occasion the imposition of violence upon others: A judge articulates her understanding of a text, and as a result, somebody loses his freedom, his property, his children, even his life... Neither legal interpretation nor the violence it occasions may be properly understood apart from one another (Cover, 1992, p. 242).

Cover echoes Walter Benjamin, writing in 1921: "...in the exercise of violence over life and death, more than in any other legal act, the law affirms itself" (Benjamin, 1996, p. 242). The law bears authority because it can hurt you. A monopoly on legitimate violence is what makes law *law*.

I have been teaching writing workshops and organizing college programs in prisons since 2006. Between that work and reading thousands of essays by incarcerated people from across the nation, I know that without testimony to the human costs of law's violence, we can never measure the true costs of the current legal order. Incarcerated people know first-hand what Cover also claims, that "...the interpretive commitments of [legal] officials are realized...in the flesh" (Cover, 1992, p. 203).

I suspect our guide would agree but question the relevance. *You do bad, you get punished*. I picture him repeating this mantra as he plunges a needle into arms, groin, hands, throat, feet, under collar bones and all the other places such hunts have taken untrained hands. If he was in this business a decade ago, I can picture him clapping away any lingering doubts as then-Texas governor Rick Perry replied to a Republican presidential primary debate moderator when asked what he had to say about the record 234 people executed under his watch, Perry replied without hesitation, "Americans understand justice." Perry had also lost no sleep—"No sir"—over the possibility that he had signed off on the murder of innocents, placing full trust in the Texas judiciary (Montopoli, 2011). Like audiences to town-square executions before and after this nation was founded, many in the California audience cheered, announcing their values in a celebration of death in a world lethally coded White v.s. Black (Masur, 1989, p. 27).

The modern insistence that justice can be measured in years of suffering and death is peculiar to authoritarian regimes, theocracies, dictatorships, colonial powers, and the US. It's an Old Testament belief that has only periodically faced contest in a stridently New Testament nation, least of all by those who can safely assume that legal violence will land on others. This reach into an imaginary past is particularly ironic among supporters who evoke the nation's founding values.

Rehabilitative confinement, theorized by Benjamins Rush and Franklin between signing the *Declaration* and the start of the first penitentiary experiment on Walnut Street, was deemed virtually obligatory in a nation whose constitution and half of its original Amendments guarantee the rights of criminal suspects, trial by jury, and bar cruel and unusual punishments. Little wonder, since a quarter of all British immigrants at the time were transported felons.

On March 9, 1787, Rush argued to Franklin's salon that once hidden, legalized punishment would metastasize in public imagination. His descriptions mirror the rage for Gothic tales of his day: winding roads up mountain passes to prison gates whose creaking would echo from the surrounding cliffs. The highest profile critic of capital punishment of his day, Rush theorized that would-be criminals would be better deterred by fantasies of what might be done to the condemned than by scenes bound to draw sympathy to outlaws or harden the audience to violence (Rush, 1787). What emerged was a prison with two bodies: one in public imagination, one behind walls, and the public habit of accepting officials' reports and censoring incarcerated writers.

For the past two decades, my professional career has been committed to creating platforms for the writing of incarcerated people. In 2013, seventy-one essays from twenty-seven states appeared in *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in American*. The title—suggested by a man who served four decades in California prisons—demonstrated that the prison and jail population is not only larger than all but the three largest American cities; scattered among an archipelago of over 5,000 lockups, confined writers articulate an experience more coherent than we might expect from a survey of residents of New York, L.A., or Chicago: regular degradation, abuse, and debilitation, woven through with miraculous feats of resilience, insight, innovation, and active resistance. That book's deadline passed in 2012, but essays kept coming, leading to the creation of *The American Prison Writing Archive*, a digital archive, to date, of over 3,800 essays by over 1,100 incarcerated authors. Both the need for and the challenge of this work stem from the same root: white American voters without family in cages have never much cared what happens to imprisoned people as long as, alive or dead, they stay inside.

Inside the Texas death chamber, my colleagues' eyes darted about over straps and glass and a microphone fixed on a boom to catch final words. Progressives all, we search the concrete scene of what the current president celebrates and over half of all Americans support: a human being lying strapped down and chemically paralyzed (to spare witnesses' sensitivities) as their lungs fill with their own bodily fluids. After years of decline in the numbers, we're seeing an uptick driven not by more gruesome crimes but the usual reason: "governors and prosecutors seeking to burnish their crime-fighting bona fides" (Malone, 2024, p. 4).

That execution does not deter murder has been argued as far back as the seventeenth century, and that debate continues (Masur, 1989, p. 4). Whatever its practical efficacy, state-sanctioned killing bears profound

cultural and political resonance, as Governor Perry made evident. Execution not only demonstrates law's ultimate power over life and death. Today's pseudo-medical apparatus, the ritual, poignant final meals and

words and years of litigation—like bright walls and polished glass—sterilize retribution of the taint of raw vengeance. A behavior the Greek philosopher Plato compared to the madness of whipping a rock. An exercise in collective bad faith, antiseptic execution has the dual effects of dipping collective hands into blood and washing those of the state. This scentless room announces, *Murder is one thing; state-sponsored punishment quite another*. Yet "in this very violence," Walter Benjamin adds, "something rotten in the law is revealed" (Rush, 1787).

Inside prison walls across the nation—where cellphones are contraband, accountability absent, and judicial review the infrequent exception—what’s rotten grows rank. State power to under-screen, under-train, and over-arm immunized actors is the proscenium to a man handcuffed, his ankles shackled, pushed from the top of a flight of concrete stairs. It is a man slammed into a wall with the force to shatter an eye socket. It is a mentally ill man locked into a 160-degree shower until the skin peels from his corpse. It is the sexual favors and routinized rape of caged women, demanded as the price of legally mandated food and medical care (Santo, et. al., 2023; Hawkins, 2017; Brown, 2017). The public may occasionally feel the prick of scandal or conscience in the infrequent instances when such incidents reach the media, but these rare occasions rise up to awareness from a sea of complacency with death by incarceration.

For much of the prison’s history, clemency limited the penal landscape. Clemency is now rare and death by incarceration common. Over 200,000 people serve life or virtual life (50 years +) sentences in the US—more than the entire prison population in 1970. An additional 50,000—two thirds of them Black and most commonly sentenced when under the age of twenty-five—have no parole date, thus mandated to die inside (Nellis, et. al., 2025). After living for decades condemned to death by incarceration, Ken Hartman observes of Life without Parole sentences, “The civil rights community trumpets it as a progressive development, while the ‘tough on crime’ crowd uses it as a compassionate cover” (Hartman, 2016). In the nineteenth century, it was argued by many that life sentences have a deterrent effect because a living death is more terrible to contemplate than death itself.¹ Today, death by incarceration is touted as an act of mercy. And what cannot be done to bodies caged with the walking dead?

Four hours later, the conference underway, I’m standing at a podium before a few dozen academics, tracing the history of American prison witnesses. Yet that turquoise room still dampens the back of my neck in a way even Texas air conditioning can not touch. I conclude my remarks and for the next two days, the conference—with the usual earnest discussion and equally earnest drinking—continues to unfold. Replacing public death, maiming and dismemberment with a quarantine of time was a civilizing idea. But all institutions seek self-preservation, let alone one built for secrecy. Reports from 1799 describing spaces of violence and abuse by state employees are echoed in 2025 because it has flattered us to believe US law points elsewhere. One place the law has pointed repeatedly is the death chamber.

Since 1848, when it was established as the state’s first prison, men inside the Walls Unit at Huntsville have been fed repellent food, baked to death in Texas summers, and subjected to beatings and degradation (Blakinger, 2023). Yet as our guide explained, years of legal challenges to execution have rendered acts as simple as rescuing a killing-chamber curtain rod subject to judicial review. As long as public conscience is soothed regarding how convicted people are killed and it does not matter how they live.

What matters in Texas and in every other state are race and history. Since the colonial period, those slated for death have been primarily young and Black (Masur, 1986). Today, Black people and Whites count evenly among homicide victims, yet 75% of executions are for the killing of Whites. Black executees are three times their percentage of the general population, and four times that percentage are sentenced to die between prison walls. Of the 1,567 executions carried out in the US since 1976—after a Supreme Court moratorium required states to find less arbitrary methods of deciding whom to kill (that is, methods that obscure blatant racism)—82% have occurred in former slave states (Death Penalty Resource Center, 2025). Prison slavery itself—protected by the 13th Amendment—remains practice in those

¹ Masur, *Rites of Execution*, 144.

states, while other states and the federal government pay nickels per hour for the labor that makes mass scale incarceration possible.

The Black Lives Matter movement brought long needed attention to executions carried out without benefit of arrest, charging, or jury. Few practices demonstrate how much less Black lives are made to matter than fully adjudicated death. Over thirty years ago, Mumia Abu-Jamal named this fact in a *Yale Law Journal* article written from Pennsylvania's death row. A Supreme Court decision admitted the death penalty's application is racist, yet claimed that the court could not reverse the death sentence of a Black man named Warren McCleskey.

Justice Powell noted with alarm, 'McCleskey's claim, taken to its logical conclusion, throws into serious question the principles that underlie our entire criminal justice system.' What does happen, in this America, is the cheapening of Black life and the placing of a premium upon white life. As Justice Brennan's eloquent dissent in McCleskey argues, the fact that this practice may be customary does not make it constitutional. To do justice, one must consistently battle, in Brennan's words, 'a fear of too much justice' (Abu-Jamal, 1991, p. 992-1003).

Where the highest court fears too much justice, the result is bound to be too little. But if the prison is such an abject failure, why does it and its debilitating practices persist? Not because prisons prevent crime. Studies and task forces reaching back nearly a century have found prisons criminogenic. Yet legal caging continues, the numbers rising and sinking with the political rhetoric and moral panics of the moment. From a prison in California, Bobby Wheeler names one psychic root of the prison's longevity:

You need us (criminals) to identify yourselves with, to secretly envy, and to stoutly punish. Yes! We represent your alter egos—your "bad" selves—rejected and projected. We do for you the forbidden, illegal things you wish to do and, like scapegoats of old, we bear the burdens of your displaced guilt and punishment (...) Crime in the news is often a kind of sermon; it is a warning, a reminder of the existence of evil and the necessity for good to conquer (...) Hence the wretched handling of me and my brethren, from beginning to end, is part of a daily morality play—a publicly supported, moralistic ritual enactment, without benefit of clergy (Wheeler, 2018, page unknown).

Wheeler suggests that our so-called modern criminal legal system is less modern than we would like to believe. The continuing authority of states to kill flags and an archaic desire for human sacrifice, a ritual conducted before a sanctified fire intended to cast our shadows into the upright silhouettes we want to believe distinguish us from socially constructed (non-white) monsters. Criminal law's monopoly on lethal authority requires what critic Rene Girard called sacred violence, and French philosopher Michel Foucault named over forty years before Bobby Wheeler: "Prison is the only place where power is manifest in its naked state, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as moral force (...) Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil (Foucault, 1977, p. 45)." Perry, Trump, Greg Abbot, Ron DeSantis

et al trade in this serenity: White America's sense of justice is no abstraction. It can be measured in the weight of dead Black bodies.

Would prisons become more humane if all forms of capital punishment, including death-by-incarceration sentences were abolished? The results are in that question. Capital punishment today is in retreat. Twenty-three states have abolished it. Three more have it on the books but are under gubernatorial moratoria. Several of those without temporary bans have executed no one for over a decade. And even states where execution is relatively common, it is most common in a handful of counties. Yet US jails and prisons remain sites of continuing abuse. And any felony sentence, as Michelle Alexander's best-selling analysis has made clear, is an effective life sentenced to second-class citizenship.

Nations that have ended state murder are nations that have also embraced Rush's original vision, acknowledging the human dignity even of law breakers, abandoning the belief that justice can be portioned out in pain and suffering. Over the hundreds of years that we have insisted on the accuracy of that measure, convenient cover has been offered for an unbroken history of penal apartheid, stamped and sealed by police, prosecutors, prisons, and the Supreme Court.

After the conference ends, *en route* to the airport seventy miles to the southeast, I make a brief pilgrimage to the Rothko Chapel in downtown Houston. It's a warm April Fool's Day. In the park adjacent to the chapel, the sounds of a festival for kids—calliope, a bouncy house emanating screeches of laughter—wafts on the humidity through a thin hedge. Inside Rothko's octagonal bunker, the hush of both museum and church rises with the heat toward segmented glass. The air on the floor is nearly chilling. Each wall features one canvas or a triptych of the fourteen canvases the painter composed for this space: all black, a few edged in a purple that emerges only after a second's gazing. Worn wooden bench seats fan from the center, I sit and face one wall of canvases, then move to the next—paintings that invoke something like awe at the wonder of blankness. The peace here is infectious. A Chapel brochure calls this "a sacred space, a forum for world leaders, a place for solitude and gathering. It is an epicenter for civil rights, a quiet disruption, a stillness that moves."

Houston is a blue city floating on oil profits. The first major city to elect an openly queer mayor, while hosting one of the nation's most terrifying lockups, the Harris County Jail. And this chapel—as light pours down on soothing darkness—just an hour from the gravitational center of law's carnage. If Americans were haunted by what we do to condemned people, Huntsville would be the Auschwitz of state murder: Its mere mention would sober conversation or embitter debate. In truth, there is no such haunting for Americans other than the usual suspects: the inhabitants of the nation's 5000+ lockups and of neighborhoods where police operate as the prison's agents in the field. So everyone else, Huntsville remains the name of yet another American town where the prison and university (tax-funded job makers for different generations) employ nearly everyone other than those providing food and car repair, retail labor, municipal services and funerals for prison and university workers.

The myth that prisons make the public safer or anyone better is more deeply seated and as evidence free as the belief that state killing reduces murder. As deep as the idea that execution or prisons can be fixed by anything short of changes so profound as to constitute abolition. For over two centuries, prison reform—the regular tinkering with policies and practices, including those of legalized death—has been the carrot dangling in front of this inexhaustible mule to keep it moving in ever widening circles. Reform dug the mass grave for human futures and hope that US prison reformers push as a humane alternative, practiced now at industrial scale. Perhaps this is what the

boutique turquoise walls in the death chamber insist: Court approved and medicalized, this is no industry, no machinery for piling up corpses under political platforms.

For most of our history, we had the excuse that, however far short they fell from their founding ideals, American prisons had nowhere to look for anything better. That is simply not true today. Many European nations have managed to create and run prisons stripped of punishment other than a limited quarantine of time; prisons that are forward looking, where staff work with convicted people to prepare for the day of release. That these nations do not execute is part of the same collective agreement that grounds all other practice. Two centuries ago, these nations sent envoys to study a radical American experiment in responding to crime. Today that tide is trickling in reverse. US prison administrators and others are going abroad to study how to practice what was indeed a truly great American idea.

My Lyft driver from Huntsville to the Chapel and Chapel to airport is a born Huntsvillean with family and health problems. As we drove toward the city, he voiced a longing for the return of Donald Trump (“when everybody had money”), softened by sympathy for people like himself working to make ends meet. Bradon drives well and laughs easily. He parked himself somewhere while I was in the Chapel. When I text him that I’m out, he swoops back to the curb where we parted. I’d left my bag and laptop in his car because he seemed an honest sort, like most Americans if you give them half a chance. We’d agreed to handle the cost of the ride from chapel to airport off the books, like good libertarians. At the airport curb, when I offer him three twenties, he rears back in his seat, hands up: “Whoa! I don’t want to be *that* guy.” He takes forty.

It would have been easy enough to broach the subject of capital punishment. But it was a long ride, and even two days later I’m still feeling more sobered by time in the killing chamber than I like (and I don’t drink). From waiting with Attica prison guards while men make their way to my classroom, I know anyone can surprise you. A straight FOX or OAN party line can veer around LGBTQA+ or disability rights as well as even execution. The heresy usually stems from personal experience: a queer sister, a locked-up cousin, or, in Bradon’s case, navigating his mother’s wheelchair around a town with more hills than ramps. I confess, I liked Bradon and did not want to imagine him sitting beside a man in a vest cheering on their former governor. I didn’t want him to fail to surprise me. As he drives away, his lefthand tick-tocking a V left and right, I wish I had given him more credit.

I want to give all Americans more credit.

The best I can manage is to acknowledge that those who have never felt the real or near nip of police and prison guards can’t be haunted by a ghost they’ve never seen or heard knocking in the night. Of the many high hopes Benjamins Rush and Franklin held up for the prison, it has been a success only in one: erecting stone, wire and concrete between its two bodies, between witnesses viewing from two sides of tax-built walls.

The airport is not overly loud or distinct, though more colorful than the Chapel or Walls Unit: Americans in pajama-like plane wear, with a scattering of cowboy boots and hats. All decent people, no doubt, whatever their president’s and governor’s beliefs.

As I and my fellow passengers shuffle down the jet bridge, I imagine Dr. Rush quipping to Ben Franklin as he started down the steps after Mr. Franklin’s salon: *With an idea as revolutionary as this, what could go wrong?* It was a peculiar idea then, for a peculiar institution. Today, accounting for scale and all of its modes of death, it is simply more lethal.

As we lift off, departing for Syracuse, Houston shrinks from highways and high rises into unregulated sprawl, then a gray patch on a greenish landscape. Consumed below are Bradon and

all his ailing kin, Chapel staff now home and taking a load off, and hundreds of condemned people, no doubt bartering for food and tobacco after yet another inadequate meal. Ahead of me, inside Attica, a half dozen men are sitting in cages, reviewing an assigned essay by Elizabeth Hardwick and their own hand-written pages.

It's a fact rarely acknowledged even among prison educators: people charged with homicide generally make the best students. The lengths of their sentences demand seriousness about creating sustainable lives inside. Living with themselves beyond their crimes requires a depth of self-reflection and self-assessment that's rare even inside recovery circles. And in a place where any hint of weakness can get you killed, their willingness to expose vulnerability—even the intellectual vulnerability that classrooms unearth—makes it difficult not to return their trust. The men I have worked with inside Attica have seen me through a rough divorce and other difficult patches. All of them might carry a death date had New York not ended capital punishment. I don't think they've ever fully understood what an aid they've been to me simply by surviving in circumstances that make any challenges I face seem Lilliputian.

What they have taught me is that any human being, if they accept the weight of taking a life, must break down every notion they ever had about themselves, then search through the salvage for whatever they can find to begin to rebuild. Their survival in prison requires acute skills in reading others for signs of threat—in institutions that house the bulk of the nation's mentally ill—or opportunities for deal making or friendship. And they do this work while witnessing, year upon year upon decade, what happens when state power can do as it will to bodies behind walls.

These men credit me with teaching them how to write. I credit them with teaching me the country I live in, and what it means to live not only protected *by* the law but *from* it. By writing clearly about what they have learned and what they have witnessed, these men are contributing to a body of literature that reveals as much about what we are as a nation at this moment as the testimony of enslaved people made plain about an earlier era. As philosopher Lisa Guenther writes after years of reading with men on Tennessee's death row, "We could learn a lot from these people if we weren't so determined to kill them" (Guenther, 2013).

Having passed through the fifteen automated and manual gates and steel doors to reach Attica's mostly dark academic classrooms, I chat with tonight's desk officer, advise him on how his kid can apply for student aid, then enter the oatmeal-colored room assigned for the night. I arrange wobbly desk-chairs in a circle, then sit and wait. Men's voices enter the hall. I stand and approach the door, ready to break regulations once again by shaking their hands. Aiden is first, a man with a quick wink and a sly sense of humor. He asks, "How are you doing, professor. Not working too hard?"

"Nah. I'm ok," I tell him.

And as men arrive, joking, happy to see each other, for the next three hours, it's true.

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