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Andrew Dilts

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How Does it Feel to Be(come) a Problem? Active Intolerance and the Abolitionist Killjoy

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Abstract How might we cultivate or redistribute resistant affects against the intolerable? I suggest we can find a resource for such a project in the work of Sara Ahmed, specifically in the figure of the "feminist killjoy." I explore a productive connection between three archives: W.E.B Du Bois' "ever unasked question" of "How does it feel to be a problem?", the Prison Information Group's (the GIP) practice of active intolerance, and Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy. I argue that a necessary (but insufficient) part of abolitionist practices and of active intolerance to the prison is to disrupt the affective attachments to the prison held by those who are not presently incarcerated.

In the opening paragraph of the first chapter of *Souls of Black Folks,* W. E. B. Du Bois writes:

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.[1]

This rich passage opens numerous paths for reading *Souls*: We could trace how these autobiographical lines establish the epistemological register through which double-consciousness is experienced. Or we could explore how Du Bois's lived experience of Blackness grounds the political and philosophical claims of the rest of the book. Or we could take up how Du Bois's silence—in the face of being questioned—prepares the reader (perhaps unsuccessfully) for *Souls'* penultimate chapter, "The Coming of John," in which the *feeling* of being a problem is overtaken by the explicit threat made to those who are figured as

problems (both John and his sister Jennie, who is arguably the more important character in the allegory): that "problems" will be violently degraded and destroyed.

I turn to this passage from Du Bois, however, to ask how we might cultivate or redistribute *resistant affects against the intolerable*? I suggest that we can find a resource for such a project in the work of Sara Ahmed, specifically in the figure of the "feminist killjoy." There is a productive connection that can be made between three archives: Du Bois's "ever unasked question," the Prison Information Group's (the GIP) practice of active intolerance, and Ahmed's feminist killjoy. And the brief that I carry here is to claim that a necessary (but insufficient) part of abolitionist practice—and of active intolerance to the prison—is to disrupt the affective attachments to the prison that those who are not presently incarcerated might hold (especially those which may be unknown to us precisely because they have become so normalized and taken for granted as part of an economy of feeling which we often do not even feel).

Confronting "the prison" as an object, a location, or a set of practices, requires us to confront a series of persistent attachments to the feelings and desires that make the prison possible (and which are made possible by the prison). These "carceral enjoyments"—material and abstract objects of use which seemingly "free" persons enjoy because of and through the prison—are similar to what Du Bois calls the public and psychological wages paid to white laborers, the *wages of whiteness*.[2] They are the benefits of a parasitic social life produced by attempts to render socially dead those who are incarcerated, who have been incarcerated, and who are made incarcerable. These are "enjoyments" in the same sense that Saidiya Hartmann describes the "properties of enjoyment" that come from the "use" of enslaved persons.[3] The enslaved person, Hartman argues, is *enjoyed* consciously and unconsciously by those in positions of privilege and authority, building investments in the world produced by that suffering and which cannot simply be abolished without disrupting those forms of privilege and positions of authority directly.

Moreover, such parasitic use extends beyond the *direct* use of the incarcerated persons to their *indirect* use in defining the system of male-masculine hetero-normative whiteness as property.[4] This indirect use grounds ongoing attachments to policing in raced and gendered terms and ensures that whiteness, as a political project born of settler colonialism and a desire to rule over others, is able to enlist even non-white persons into white supremacy.[5] A necessary part of prison and police abolition practices require both 1) an account of the affective attachments to the parasitic social life that is constitutive of male-masculinist political domination, and 2) tactics to disrupt those attachments which are themselves intolerable to those subordinated

by whiteness. These attachments are part of an economy of carceral attachments: the politically distributed series of affects that function and multiply as part of settler-colonialist, white supremacist, hetero-patriarchy. And one of the most pernicious forms of these attachments is the attachment to left-liberal "prison reform," attempts to ameliorate the harms of carcerality but which extend the life and the scope of the prison.[6]

These carceral enjoyments have a family resemblance with what the GIP identified as "the intolerable," and challenging such enjoyments generates a similar feeling to what Du Bois diagnoses as "being a problem." My specific purpose here is to think through one model for *becoming* a problem as part of a prison abolitionist project. I extend Ahmed's account of the "feminist killjoy" as a figure who can disrupt carceral enjoyments and the parasitic social life produced by the social death effected carceral society. We might pick up this figuration in keeping with Du Bois's question, and see how *becoming* a problem, as a way of revealing the "real question," is a resistant affective practice. In becoming a killjoy, in becoming a problem as a practice of active intolerance of the intolerable, one can redistribute negative affect in ultimate service of abolishing the intolerable. We can become *abolitionist killjoys*.

The abolitionist killjoy works to directly obstruct attachments to carceral enjoyments, precisely because this figuration and practice is focused on the affective and epistemological registers of such enjoyments. Becoming an abolitionist killjoy means getting in the way of carceral enjoyments, including the carceral enjoyment of "prison reform," taking up the affective labor of naming the prison as a problem that goes far deeper than we might wish to acknowledge. At a minimum, becoming an abolitionist killjoy means insisting on the presence of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons around the "table," as a reconfiguration of social and civic life around those who resist social death. The production of a liberatory mode of social life is only possible if we dramatically change whose voices are heard, acknowledged, and prioritized in practices of collective freedom that are anti-carceral and abolitionist.

As Ahmed argues in "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)," becoming a feminist is also an experience of becoming "the problem."[7] It can be, she writes, "an alienation from happiness," by becoming out of alignment with those things one believes (or has come to believe) are "right things." Grounded in a phenomenology of feminist and anti-racist consciousness, Ahmed's account points to the productive power of seeing the alienation from what one expects to make one's self happy as a resource for imagining other worlds. It is a reclamation of the being identified as the killjoy: "the one who gets in the way of other people's happiness. Or just the one who is in the way–

you can be in the way of *whatever,* if you are already perceived as being in the way." For Ahmed, the figure of the killjoy emerges as a contrast to the expected affective scripts imposed on persons by oppressive social and political orders.

By recognizing that there *is* a gap between how one might feel and how one "ought" to feel, Ahmed insists, reveals that another world is possible. As Ahmed puts it succinctly on her own website: "Killing joy is a World Making Project." This project begins for the killjoy by creating "bad feeling" for those around her both through simple presence and through actions (disruption, willfulness). Importantly, the killjoy appears as such not simply because of willfulness, but by appearing to be willful simply for drawing attention to conditions that are otherwise ignored, suppressed, or disavowed. That is, it is *not* the case the killjoy is the source of bad feeling, but rather the killjoy "creates" bad feeling by drawing attention to the already existing bad feeling experienced by *some* that is the condition of possibility for the *good* feeling experienced by *others*. That they (the killjoy) are blamed for the bad feeling is because they take up their already abjected position as a resource to redirect bad feeling back toward others. Or as Ahmed puts it, the work of the killjoy is about *knowledge* and *knowing* in that it "shows how the familiar is not revealed to those who can inhabit it."

By forefronting the knowledge-work of a killjoy, we can see how this work is similar to that of disrupting epistemologies of ignorance (refusing willful not-knowing). It echoes the information projects of the GIP (by recentering the sources of "expert" knowledge to those who directly experience the prison), and it offers an *answer* to the unasked question ("*this* is how it feels to be a problem!"). In particular, the killjoy does this work by inhabiting the lived archives of subjugated knowledges and insisting upon their relevance, bridging what might otherwise be academic projects and political projects. Importantly, because epistemologies of ignorance are forms of *willful* not knowing (rather than a traditional ignorance of facts), the willfulness of the killjoy is an essential aspect of their force. "Willfulness could be rethought as style of politics," Ahmed writes, "a refusal to look away from what has already been looked over. The one who points out that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are actual are charged with willfulness; they refuse to allow these realities to be passed over." Being a feminist, Ahmed argues, "involves political consciousness of what women are asked to give up for happiness." And by extension, being a prison abolitionist killjoy involves raising the political consciousness of what Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are *forced* to do for the production of white happiness, white freedom, and white citizenship, of marking the carceral enjoyments, and in particular, of marking their racial and sexual genealogies.[8]

Beyond this specific epistemological disruption, bringing to light the parasitic enjoyments produced through social death, the killjoy works to directly obstruct the happiness of the prevailing social and political order. As Ahmed puts it, the willfulness of the feminist killjoy is a "willing to cause its [the flow of happiness'] obstruction." What would it mean to "get in the way" of carceral mentalities, carceral practices, and carceral enjoyments? Ahmed provides us with material models: the purest form of willfulness, she notes, of such an obstruction, is the hunger strike: "a body whose agency is expressed by being reduced to obstruction, where the obstruction to others is self-obstruction, the obstruction of the passage into the body." The central imperative of the hunger strike is to disrupt the normal operations of the carceral system as such, by focusing on the most "normal" of operations for creaturely persons: the daily process of feeding large numbers of incarcerated persons.[9] And such practices have already been theorized by incarcerated persons themselves.[10]

Even without turning to this most openly resistant and defiant form, the range of options the killjoy provides for political, epistemological, and affective disruption is expansive. And perhaps most importantly, under intolerable conditions, the mere *presence* of those who do not belong at "the table" (the metaphor that Ahmed deploys throughout her work) disrupts the good feeling of those gathered. As Ahmed notes, most of the work of the killjoy is done merely by being present "at the table" *as a willful problem,* such that the "seats" at the table would necessarily be remade: "To be unseated by the table of happiness might be to threaten not simply that table, but what gathers around it, what gathers on it." What bodies would accomplish this simply by being present? And what would it mean to remake the "table" not around the properties of enjoyment that are part and parcel with the social life of social death, but rather by taking up the accusation of being a killjoy and embracing its willfulness, stickiness, and tension?

How does one *become* a problem? How does one *force* the unasked question? Cultivating "active intolerance" is always a process of becoming a problem, of redistributing discomfort. It is a practice of turning a condition that is already a problem (the intolerable) into one that is activated, that is *known* as a problem. It is, therefore, an epistemological problem-making, a making-known that requires the presence of those whose absence is assumed, if not insisted upon. But what we learn from Ahmed is that the killjoy is *already there*, and to be the problem is always already a becoming the problem. In this sense, we must remember that "abolitionist" is not an identity, but an ongoing practice of becoming intolerant to the intolerable.

In their manifesto, the GIP decaled that "none of us is sure to escape prison."[11] As this continues to be the case in our milieu, then

active intolerance for all of us begins by attending to those who know the prison best: those who have lived there, those who have died there, and those who have survived its living death. Examples abound, and the work of the already present abolitionist killjoy is readily available: CeCe McDonald, Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Adisa Kamara, Marissa Alexander, Susan Rosenberg, Ash Williams, and so many others. The racism, the sexism, the ableism, the attachment to carcerality is present already as a condition of the happiness produced for some through intolerable institutions and conditions for others. To become an abolitionist killjoy is to *activate* intolerance to this intolerable condition. This could work to redistribute the economy of suffering, to make it known affectively, and in doing so, to take part in world-making, a process that is at the core of the abolitionist imperative to imagine and build a world in which prisons (and all which sustains them) are obsolete.

Notes

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part of Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012). For an extended account of "carceral enjoyments," see Andrew Dilts, "Carceral Enjoyments and Killjoying the Social Life of Social Death," in *Building Abolition: Decarceration and Social Justice*, Kelly Struthers Montford and Chole Taylor, eds. (Routledge, *forthcoming).*
3. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201; Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal," *Social Justice* 30, no. 2 (2003): 18–27.
4. Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in *Critical Race Theory*, ed. Kimberle Crenshaw (New York: New Press, 1995), 276–91.
5. Wilderson, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal"; Nikhil Pal Singh, "The Whiteness of Police," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 1091–99.
6. I take this formulation—"extend the life and the scope"—from the abolitionist organization Critical Resistance, whose mission is to end human caging without extending the life or the scope of the Prison Industrial Complex. For a discussion of this formulation see, Liz Samuels and David Stein, eds., "Perspectives on Critical Resistance," in *Abolition Now!: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*, by CR10 Publications Collective (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008), 1–14. Prison reform, as Foucault famously notes in *Discipline and Punish*, is as old as the prison itself and constitutive with carceral society more generally. The scholarly and activist critique of "reform" is vast and well developed, but for brief

introductions see Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Michelle Brown and Judah Schept, "New Abolition, Criminology and a Critical Carceral Studies," *Punishment & Society* 19, no. 4 (October 1, 2017): 440–62; Liat Ben-Moshe, "The Tension Between Abolition and Reform," in *The End of Prisons: Reflections From the Decarceration Movement*, ed. Mechthild E. Nagel and Anthony J. Nocella (New York: Brill Academic Publishers, 2013), 82–92; Allegra M. McLeod, "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice," *UCLA Law Review* 62 (2015): 1156–1239; Dorothy E Roberts, "Abolition Constitutionalism," *Harvard Law Review* 133, no. 1 (2019): 1–122.

7. Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2010). Ahmed explores the figure of the feminist killjoy in numerous other publications, but I restrict my analysis here to this piece. For an extended analysis of Ahmed's work, see Dilts, "Carceral Enjoyments and Killjoying the Social Life of Social Death," and Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition.* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020): 125–130.
8. As I have argued elsewhere, there is an important strand of genealogical work that is (or at least could be) abolitionist in character. See Andrew Dilts, "Toward Abolitionist Genealogy," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 55 (September 1, 2017): 51–77.
9. I take the term "creaturely" from Lisa Guenther's critical phenomenology of hunger strikes in jails and prisons. Lisa Guenther, "Beyond Guilt and Innocence: The Creaturely Politics of Prisoner Resistance Movements," in *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, ed. Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 225–40.
10. See Banu Bargu's *Starve and Immolate* for analysis of how hunger strikes and organized death fasts by incarcerated people in Turkey can be conceptualized as a politics of human weapons. Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). In the United States, it is worth noting the specific demands made by participants in 2013 renewal of hunger strikes throughout the California prison system. See Todd Ashker et al., "Prisoners' Demands," 2014, https://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/the-prisoners-demands-2/.
11. "Nul de nous n'est sûr d'échapper à la prison." "Manifest du GIP" (1971), in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits, Tome 1 : 1954–1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1042. See also *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, 1970–1980*, eds. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, trans. Perry Zurn and Erik Beranek (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).