

## **State Terror and the Reproduction of Imprisoned Dissent**

DYLAN RODRÍGUEZ

*University of California, Riverside*

Doing time does this thing to you. But, of course, you don't do time. You do without it. Or rather, time does you. Time is a cannibal that devours the flesh of your years day by day, bite by bite. And as he finishes the last morsel, with the juices of your life running down his bloody chin, he smiles wickedly, belches with satisfaction, and hisses out in ghostly tones, '*Slur the buds!*' (Peltier, 1999, p. 32)

In the early 1960s, a meeting of social scientists and prison wardens was convened by the then director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, James V. Bennett. The main speaker for the convention was Dr Edward Schein, a social scientist. He presented his theories on brainwashing and the application of such techniques to modify behaviour within the prison population. Amongst the many techniques suggested by Dr Schein were the following:

1. physically remove the prisoner to an area sufficiently isolated in order to break or seriously weaken close emotional ties;
2. segregate all natural leaders;
3. prohibit group activities that do not fit brainwashing objectives;
4. systematic withholding of mail;
5. create a feeling amongst the isolated group of prisoners that they have been abandoned by and totally isolated from the community;
6. undermine all emotional supports;
7. preclude access to literature which does not aid in the brainwashing process.

Director Bennett urged the conveners to experiment with Dr Schein's theories within their respective institutions.

(Elijah, 1995, p. 140)

### **State Power and Punitive Carcerality**

The term 'prison industrial complex' refers to a dynamic set of relations, exchanges, and non-antagonistic conflicts between hegemonic institutions in state and civil society. The judiciary, police, private industry, elected officials, law-and-order community groups and lobbyists (i.e. 'victim's rights' and anti-immigrant groups), along with the prison apparatus itself generate a

political symbiosis that simultaneously mystifies and rationalises imprisonment as a way of life. The nexus of these multiple relations — what enables the complex articulation between structures, people, and places under the expanding rubric of imprisonment — is *the practice* of state power. Violence is the core value of this practice, particularly as state power enunciates domination over (and ownership of) human bodies as the measure of peace, security, and social order.

A critical theory of the prison industrial complex potentially subverts this reification of the state and its presumptive monopoly on legitimate violence, illuminating the ways in which state power is imagined, invented, practised, embodied, *realised*. To the extent that manifest violence inscribes the presence and material reality of the state, it is possible to identify and theorise the linkages between subjects, places, and practices within the regimes of force encompassed by the prison industrial complex. Constructing a laboratory for new technologies of state violence, the prison forms a coercive centre of gravity within the contemporary social formation.

Beyond the stereotypic conceptualisation of the US prison as an insular, alienated institution residing at the edge of civil society, it is the set of relations entangled in the *practice of imprisonment* that foregrounds the prison as a mode of social organisation. This particular embodiment of state power resonates through the unique enactment of punitive carcerality. Importantly, it is this articulation between *punishment* and *incarceration* — discrete terms often conflated in popular, academic, and state discourses — that constructs and naturalises the practice of imprisonment. Imprisoned activist D.A. Sheldon ruptures this articulation, speaking to the embodied relations that condition and reproduce a structure of dehumanisation:

The first and main objective of prison administrators is to maintain emotional, mental and physical suppression by systematically dehumanising prisoners. *The intimidation factor plays a large role in the attempt to break the will and independent thinking of the incarcerated, by making that person susceptible to suggestions that she or he is less than human unless they conform to the prisoncrats' idea of an 'inmate'.* This involves the use of disciplinary sanctions, whereby every action taken by us, no matter how simple or ridiculous, is regulated under some institutional rule or policy. Once violated, severe punishment is usually handed out without a bit of remorse. *This is done so we will become pliant and submit to every whimsical command of guards, staff and administrators no matter how perverted or criminal-directed.* This is common practice at Iowa State Penitentiary, where over half the prison population is in some form of lock-up status. *This puts the fear of God into the hearts of those prisoners out in the general population, who have become scared to challenge the brutal conditions here at what I call the 'warehouse', because they don't want to get trapped into long-term isolation.* (emphasis added) (Sheldon, 1998, pp. 58–59)

Punitive carcerality thus enacts as social allegory, communicating ideas, commitments, borders, and limits through a stunning ritual of dehumanisation —

people (non-prisoners) are to learn from, take pleasure in, become obsessed with the spectacle of state authority in its moments of inscription. Prisoners, trapped in a dialectic of survival and spirit-breaking, are interpellated if not destroyed by the relations materialised on them as 'inmates'. The brilliance of Sheldon's critique is its deconstructive depiction of state punishment as drab routine, invented through and situated in a coercive, multi-dimensional set of relationships between the designated human stand-ins for 'the state' (hence the producers of state power) and those deemed non-people. 'Inmate', as a philosophical construction of embodied state power (guards, wardens, parole officials) stands for a form of non-existence — for Sheldon, the breaking of the prisoner's spirit entails the death of the human (the repression or absence of will and independent thinking) and the production of a life-in-terror (living under the 'fear of God').

This structure of imprisonment thrives off the prisoner's inevitable disobedience — short of severe chemical sedation, the imprisoned person necessarily fails the necessarily impossible categorical imperative to *become the inmate*. Will, emotion, expression, speech, and movement constitute permanent threats to the prison's coerced order — the spectre of sudden mutiny, mimetic reversals in the power relations of the prison, hovers beneath the strict rationality of the state's bare authority. Correctional officers (prison guards) persistently, obsessively urge one another to remain vigilant against prisoners who refuse to act like inmates. J. McGhee-King of Pleasant Valley State Prison (California) writes in *Peacekeeper*, the monthly publication of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, with no apparent irony that

Manipulation is something that most of us, as human beings, do at some point in our lives in order to get the things we want and need. The difference between us [correctional officers] and a maladaptive manipulator is *we do not use other people or harm others in order to meet those real or perceived needs*. (emphasis added)

State authority and its presumption of legitimate violence thus renders a banal hyper-rationality: prison guards, the embodiment of the state's obligation to exert order on and extract security from the bodies of the unruly, are uniformed walking structures of innocent force. In their own terms, CO's can *only be* heroic/tragic victims of the scheming, subversive prisoner whose ultimate purpose is to obtain, exploit, and capitalise. McGhee-King continues,

A maladaptive manipulator is often an abuser of alcohol and/or other chemical substances, which obviously includes a high population of incarcerated persons. Regardless of the consequences, these professional manipulators go to great lengths to use various techniques in order to gain control over us and become 'above the rules'. Some techniques are transparent. More familiar examples include, 'If you don't get me some pain medication, then I'll just do a mandown', or, 'If I don't get my psych medication tonight, I'll just nut up.' And there's one we've all heard, 'I'll just call my lawyer, or 602 you'.

... I would venture to say that probably most of us have been the

victim of inmate manipulation at some time or another ... It is important to remember where we work and the kind of people we are working with. We must be vigilant at all times. Being human means we all have weaknesses. You can believe that day after day those inmates we deal with are constantly searching for an area in our personalities that they can use to attempt some control over us. (McGhee-King, 2000, p. 13)

The punishment of such imminent disobedience is thus the realisation of state power: here, *terror itself* becomes the moral of the story — prisoners *ought to* live in fear, in return for the fear they have wrought (as retroactive threats to a presumably civilised order) and continue to extract (as caged, violent quasi-people always on the cusp of returning to freedom or overtaking the facility). This practice of coercion constructs what I will refer to in this essay as the *regime of state terror* which, in a perverse moral turn, forms the baseline for the ‘security’ of civil society.

Security — the structure of feeling that fabricates safety amidst imminent danger — necessitates pre-emptive and aggressive state violence in order to fortify civilisation at the boundary of lawlessness and racialised savagery. The permanent missions of ‘peace-keeping’, ‘law-and-order’, and ‘policing’ constantly remind us that this frontier persists as it mutates in the movement of dangerous and unruly bodies, which require containment, repression, discipline, punishment, and extermination. This essay examines the production of terror that emerges from the state-sanctioned — and generally obscured — fortification of free world security through the contained, systematic reproduction of unmediated and comprehensive state violence in the prison world. The conspicuousness of the prison as a static landmark, accessible cultural icon, and age-old state institution belies its significance as a dynamic terror machine. The punishment of people imprisoned resonates beyond the empirical effect on bodies and laws, and defies the coerced invisibility of the prison’s ‘inside’. Marilyn Buck, a political prisoner from Dublin (CA) women’s prison, thus reconstructs imprisonment as a cultural, social, and political production that transforms an individualised regime — the punishment and persistent criminalisation of the woman prisoner — into a unique state province.

Prisons function as small city-states or fiefdoms; the denizens — prisoners — are subject not only to society’s laws, but also to the ever-changing, arbitrary power of the overseers and keepers. *Punishment is a province of the prison system, a policy of terror ...*

Punishment begins the moment one is incarcerated: one is stripped of possessions, clothing, family, and both civil and human rights. The legal sentence is not only a judgment of guilt but also an assessment of normality.

The first step in this process is to criminalise the individual and strip her of her long-held social and personal identity. The individual enters the prison gates as an offender. The repressive apparatus seeks to forge a ‘delinquent — the object of the apparatus’ out of the offender in order to expand capitalist industry (criminology, criminal justice programs in

academia, sociology, etc.). Some few who enter may readily accept the concept that they are criminals, bad girls, or 'outlaws'. Most women know they are not criminals and struggle against the dehumanisation implicit in the process of criminalisation ...

What is normal and routine in this world would be a nightmare to one who has not had to experience such indignity: lack of control over one's own self, censorship, punishment and even torture by the guards with license. The only comparable environments, besides mental institutions, are militarised, policed 'ghettoes' or 'barrios', state-of-seige arenas — situations that many white US-born people have never experienced unless one has been held hostage, as in abusive relationships. [emphasis added] (Buck, 2000)

Buck's conception of terror defies the theoretical and political impulse to render prison and imprisonment as discrete and self-contained institutions or apparatuses, insular to social formation and 'away from' or 'outside' civil society. As she would have it, the terror of punishment composes a constitutive logic of repression, permeating the *space* of the prison as well as the *production* of imprisonment. The prison's 'techniques of control' — for Buck, 'infantilisation', 'hypervigilance', 'racism in the name of diversity', 'defilement', and 'mortification' — inscribe social formation on imprisoned women's bodies, activities, and relations, sustaining impact beyond prison space, particularly as women prisoners re-enter the free world accompanied and constituted by the lasting terror of punishment.

State terror constructs relationships and alters subjectivities, ultimately forming new contexts and agents for the radical rupturing of hegemonic knowledges and institutions, as well as state power itself. It is to the radical possibilities haunting the bleeding and suffering of punitive carcerality that this essay turns in a search for some way out, beyond that violent contact between civilisation and savagery, security and violence, that so consistently manufactures the frontiers that punish and kill.

We must all remember that the prison system is set up to control us so we can be silenced by our keepers at all times. We do not deserve to be treated as inhuman. We need to take the struggle to the next level. And if we dig deep enough, we will find sources of the needed opposition to this society right from within the prison populace. (Sheldon, 1998, p. 4)

### **The Condition of State Terror**

State terror, in its materiality, effect, and affect, generates an ensemble of performances that overshadow spaces while constituting them. Beyond reified conceptions of state repression and violence as episodic manifestations of the state's presumed monopoly on legitimate violence, *terror* suggests the formation of a regime that renders such state practices inseparable from the subjects, discourses, and places that they constitute and reproduce. State terror is *contingent* because it is dependent on particular relations of power (structural and personal), and *comprehensive* as it folds back into itself and the people

drawn into its sweep. The boundaries between terrorists and the terrorised often blur or dissolve, all the while reproducing a dichotomous relation of violence that reconstitutes the essential relation between master-slave, settler-native, guard-prisoner. Lewis Gordon, elaborating Fanon's 'tragic revolutionary violence' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, suggests that the violent dialectic sustaining the relation between oppressors and oppressed is the institutionalisation of a *state of war*. For Gordon, the core conflict is an antagonism grounded in conditions of existence. The telos of conventional warfare and the assumptive rationality of political conflict fail this ontology of dehumanisation.

The torturer's violence pushes him directly into the face of human misery; the resistance-terrorist's actions push him into the world of an irremediable fact. Even oppressors suffer. Both face an existential reality in the midst of which trembles the possibility of a human being. For despite the chains of command, despite the various decision-makers at play, what eventually confronts both the torturer and the resistance-terrorist is the sheer anonymity of the Enemy. The enemy whom he has learned to hate is peculiarly absent from the shrieking flesh-and-blood reality in the torture chamber ...

The tragedy faced by any one seriously engaged in struggle against the institutional encouragement of dehumanisation is that institutionalised dehumanisation is fundamentally a state of war. In such a state, the ordinary anonymity of which we spoke earlier is saturated with a pathological consciousness that makes any feature of human beings beyond their typifications fall to the wayside. (Gordon, 1996, pp. 305–6)

None can exist outside the regime of state terror because it is fundamentally the condition of a relation: in this case, we are concerned with how the 'institutionalised dehumanisation' manifesting in the prison works to categorically disappear the 'inmate's' existence as a human while producing a regime for the constant re-inscription of state power. Terror, then, works beyond its institutional confines and often outside the will of its agents, instilling a mode of fearing that deploys the prisoner's body as a literal and metaphoric point of departure for the allegory of state power/violence. Within the terrain produced by the prison's peculiar 'state of war', *viable opposition is impossible* — where the Enemy's accumulated bodies are being composted and dug *as* trenches, state power wages a war without recognisable opponents. Prisoners cannot be accorded the implicit political status of state antagonist, for to do so would subvert the ideological edifice of the prison industrial complex, in which convicts are only — and can only be — criminals. In the general absence of legitimate conflicts over state authority, the presumed conflict becomes pure contrivance, and the fantasy of opposition to state power must attempt a form of rupture from the very relation of terror itself. Sheldon's exhortation (quoted above) to fellow prisoners to 'dig deep', searching for sources of opposition from within the heart of the gulag, resonates the open-ended and fearful nature of this political challenge. It is, essentially, a call to arms for categorical non-subjects to violate the logic of dehumanisation without the guarantees of a liberation (physical or existential) that awaits on the other side of revolt.

Confronting this regime requires that the prisoner willingly subject her/himself to the ritualised inscription of manifest state terror. Opposition under a regime of institutionalised dehumanisation thus implies a leap beyond assumptive rationality toward an epistemological break from institutionalised knowledge as such. Where repression is a way of life, critical intellectuality is a practice of freedom. As it works to demystify, critique, and oppose the *very condition from which it emerges*, the knowledge production of state terror's imprisoned human objects fosters a mode of knowing that is in irreconcilable conflict with the prison's (and, by extension, the state's) constitutive logic of containment, silence, and punishment. Marilyn Buck has consistently argued the necessity of this kind of antagonism, elaborating the existential paradox of the radical prisoner's political subjectivity.

*Alienated is a safer state of mind.* Being at the margins is definitely more honorable and more productive. If one yearns for the center, the center swallows all it can. This is about resistance. (emphasis added, Buck, private correspondence, 26 November 1999)

Against the regime of terror, radical prisoners theorise, envision, and practice a freedom that searches for an alienated safety at the bleeding edge of state violence. Prisoners like Buck dream resistance from within the living nightmare of the gulag, restoring a sensibility of and incorrigible desire for radical justice that render them unassimilable to the bowels of state power. Joy James's critique of Foucault's panoptic 'carceral network' in *Discipline and Punish* speaks to the irreducibility of state violence and terror within a late-capitalist hegemony that reproduces as it obsessively obscures and sanitises multiple relations of unmediated coercion. As punishment and state force materialise on the surface of prisoners' bodies, state terror constitutes their conditions of existence. The prison's 'inside' thus becomes a place 'outside' the disciplinary carcerality of the free world.

American prisons constitute an 'outside' in US political life. In fact, our society displays waves of concentric outside circles with increasing distances from bourgeois self-policing. The state routinely polices the unassimilable in the literal hell of lockdown, deprivation tanks, control units, and holes for political prisoners. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault remains mute about the incarcerated person's vulnerability to police beatings, rape, shock treatments, and death row. Penal incarceration and executions are the state's procedures for discarding the unassimilable into an external inferno of nonexistence. Not everything, nor everyone, is saved. (James, 1996, p. 34)

Those not saved become the objects of state violence and the permanently endangered subjects of state terror. Here the question immediately arises, 'What happens when the unassimilables speak back?' This is neither to fetishise agency nor to suggest that acting from a condition of non-existence constitutes a radical praxis *sui generis*. The task instead lies in the asking of several fundamental epistemological questions:

1. When subjects collide against their own imminent erasure as subjects in a regime of institutionalised dehumanisation, how do they *make sense* of their condition?
2. Is 'making sense' possible, or even desirable, for the person living the regime of terror?
3. How does one construct political subjectivity, or manifest political agency, within the comprehensive and invasive carceral of state terror/imprisonment?

Tashiri Harrison, a prisoner detained in a Pelican Bay (CA) Security Housing Unit (sensory deprivation cell), resonates these questions in his narrative of politicisation in the teeth of state repression:

I'm 27 yrs. young (not old), whom is presently serving a life sentence, as well as an indeterminate SHU [security housing unit], within the desolate confines of the security housing unit at Pelican Bay State Prison. I've been wrongfully sentenced to an indeterminate SHU since '94. The sole basis of me being sentenced to an indeterminate SHU has nothing to do with violence, only my political beliefs and my overall position of remaining devoted and committed to the oppressed masses within. In that, I refuse to be silenced when it comes to speaking out and/or acting on outlandish matters that directly/indirectly affect the oppressed masses within. I wasn't always this way. In fact it took me a while to become more responsible for my actions. For I was basically what you can consider to be state raised. For I've practically been through every juvenile and/or reform facility, from group homes all the way through the California Youth Authority and to the state penitentiary — you name it, I've been there. I first came to the penitentiary at the tender age of 19, and it was during that time that I first began to channel my energies in a more constructive manner. Albeit, it wasn't until my first confrontation with these fascist officials that landed me in the adjustment center at San Quentin when my plight actually began. So I guess that you have probably put it together by now that I'm a revolutionary ... It is this noted dedication that has caused the administration here to fabricate allegations that I belong to a prison gang of the disruptive type and give me an indeterminate SHU ... In most cases, it is just for the sake of acting in a wanton fashion, to maintain the '*zero tolerance agenda*' that has been set forth. (Harrison, correspondence, 20 February 2000)

The agenda of 'zero tolerance' guiding punitive carcerality presumes the existence — and persistent possibility — of political subjectivities beyond the paradigmatic 'inmate'. Where coherent political opponents are not available, they are manufactured from the durable material of criminality in order to spur the practice of state power. The uncontrollable terror that emerges on the edges of state power ultimately reconstitutes the regime itself, conditioning the relations between tortured people like Harrison and the embodied domination



that practices on them. *Terror produces the political subject from the condition of unassimilability.*

Allen Feldman's ethnographic study of victims and agents of political torture in Northern Ireland reveals the fatal linkage between power and violence within regimes of state captivity. Here the prisoner is neither emptied of the humanity that persists in and beneath the surface of the body, nor is s/he conceptualised as a mere slate upon which state violence inscribes. Rather, Feldman suggests the state's creative and persistent re/production through a performative terrorism, specifically manifested through the elaborate rituals of prison torture. State violence, in other words, does not merely *materialise* authority and domination, but also *produces it* through the exercise of terror itself.

*The performance of torture does not apply power; rather it manufactures it from the 'raw' ingredient of the captive's body. The surface of the body is the stage where the state is made to appear as an effective material force. ... The state (m)others bodies in order to engender itself. The production of bodies — political subjects — is the self-production of the state. (emphasis in the original) (Feldman, 1991, p. 115)*

Feldman's implication of torture's production of bodies and subjects, along with James's elaboration of incorrigibility in the political 'outside' of invisibility and civil death, offer important theoretical terms for the focus of this discussion: namely, how the 'raw material' of state terror's manufacture *acts back*. Why do radical prisoners refuse silence when the consequences of (political) deviance are so imminent and severe? How does *embracing* punishment, while rejecting the legitimacy of the apparatus that produces it, spur the very political disobedience that state power abhors? How does the constituted, overdetermined space of the prison shape and transform the 'cognitive praxis' of radical prisoners? In part, these questions form an attempt to engage an epistemology that necessarily remains outside the common sense of civil society.

Kornfeld's study of prison art in *Cellblock Visions* reveals the way in which the lived experience of imprisonment permeates the creative production of the imprisoned, forming an alternate symbolic universe in which, often if not always, only a generalised evil and horror can be presumed as understood in common and readily available for visual rendering. While Kornfeld is not exclusively concerned with overtly 'political' art, her thesis resonates the fundamental political agency of a creativity that reconstructs the terror in which it lives.

The prison environment often limits artistic subject matter. For example, the revelation of that which is deeply personal is generally too risky. As one man said, 'I want to go deep, but I don't want to go too deep'. Personal dreams and nightmares, one's own particular demons, are best kept to oneself. Prison life is unbearable enough without being labeled 'weird'. Horrific images of the general evils of incarceration are quite acceptable, however, because they are commonly understood. (Kornfeld, 1997, p. 10)

It is precisely the rendering visible of those state practices so persistently shunted from public view that restores the capacity of communication, both within and beyond the walls of the prison itself. In Kornfeld's study, art conveys the common sense of the inside as imprisoned artists make pain their primary medium, often evoking collective (if not popular) social identifications in an anti-social milieu. Radical prisoners similarly wage critical deconstruction through a process of devastation. For them, state terror — ultimately the nightmare of psychic and emotional isolation in tandem with various forms of physical torture — is as productive as it is inevitable and repressive. Political prisoner Bill Dunne writes in correspondence that it is the struggle to *break* the repressive regime that necessitates new ways of knowing. Importantly, he articulates no convenient step programme or simple solution to this severe epistemological challenge.

Part of the problem(s) of political prisoners' marginalisation is their isolation from non prisoners by the US Gulag Archipelago. The trend in the last couple decades has been toward ever greater isolation of prisoners generally and political prisoners particularly from society generally and the activist community particularly. The ruling class and its apparatus of repression, driven by *their* (as opposed to society's) purpose in maintaining an ever expanding gulag archipelago, has recognised such isolation as essential to imprisonment being an effective tool of control. Breaking or at least undermining that isolation, however, is not as easy as it sounds. (Dunne, private correspondence, 4 November 1999)

In resistance to violent isolation, the unassimilable may presume — at times even desire — physical death at the hands of state terror. Feldman's meditation on the fatal dialectic of violence and agency, however, rearticulates the political and existential terrain of imprisonment. Here, the apparent contradiction embodied in the radical prisoner's political incorrigibility — as they self-consciously *extract* state repression while practicing its failure to incapacitate or break one's spirit — becomes something other than a binary conflict between state authority and subversive agency. Instead, the thickness and depth of state terror enacts a unique gravity on prisoner's bodies, which respond by absorbing punishment while *socialising its implications*.

Unassimilability thus becomes the basis for punishment's ultimate failure: the force of domination, always incomplete, fosters and politicises the body's power to disobey, refuse, and act back — both against domination and upon other situated bodies. Moreover, as Feldman reminds, this punishment, disobedience, and *disobedience to punishment* creates new discursive and historical possibilities that might only be realised in the moment of violence and terror.

The very act of violence invests the body with agency. The body, altered by violence, reenacts other altered bodies dispersed in time and space; it also reenacts political discourse and even the movement of history itself. Political violence is a mode of transcription; it circulates codes

from one prescribed historiographic surface or agent to another. (Feldman, 1991, p. 7)

As an apparatus of state terror, the US prison industrial complex sustains a theoretical and practical commitment to a ritualised violence that conceives the mass of prisoners as bodies to be burned rather than spirits to be 'normalised'. A relation of unmediated force crystallises at the border of the prison wall, as humans pass into a regime that requires their radical de-individualisation and pure subjection to state authority. In his important article 'The Cultural Commodification of Prisons', prisoner journalist Paul Wright elaborates the death of containment and argues a notion of imprisonment that implicates the state's production of fatal space.

American prisons cannot be compared to Nazi extermination camps in that quick death is not their industrial purpose ... However, increased sentences, overcrowding, brutality, disease and inadequate medical care all translate into death by incarceration. The increased popularity and use of sentences of life without parole, natural life, mandatory prison sentences of 30, 40 and 90 years before release, all translate into one thing: death behind bars. The majority of the American anti death penalty movement opposes active state measures which lead to a convict's death, but for the most part supports death by incarceration as a humane alternative. The end result is the same: death at the hands of the state. It just takes longer. (Wright, 1999)

State terror affects more than those who formally linger at the edge of this incarcerated death. Native American activist, teacher, and scholar Chrystos speaks to the experience of terror and risk that meaningful solidarity work wreaks for the free person. 'Freedom', even (perhaps especially) for those not in state bondage, loses coherence on contact with the regime that intends a comprehensive destruction of body and spirit. The free political subject's *intentional and self-conscious* movement into terrorised space works to dismantle the ideological and visceral façade of police state democracy, while generating a quality of political commitment that defies common sense rationality.

I've done time behind many bars. Every time I visit the prison, I'm in terror that I won't get out again. There is no experience, including gang rape, which has tortured me as much as being locked up. One is stripped of dignity, privacy, dreams, will, silence, indeed from every kind of healing which human beings need. (Chrystos, presentation at 'Critical Resistance' conference/strategy session, 25 September 1999)

In the space of the prison, violence overdetermines discipline and surveillance articulates as coercion, forming a physical, visceral, and psychic context that funnels and focuses oppositional political subjects.

Where the disciplinary hegemony of the free world presumes the malleability — and thus, the final conformity — of bodies and subjects, the prison seeks to burn off the deviant excess, punishing and effectively exterminating those who lie beyond the constructed limits of the normalising regime. These

relations of pure force suggest a specificity to state violence that renders the power logic of capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy as something beyond the discipline/consent dyad for those deviant people who require advanced forms of containment and annihilation. James writes,

Within the private realm or underground economy of prisons or workfare, different forms of punishment with more intensive violence emerge. If the 'art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power' is designed not to expiate or repress but to 'normalise', as Foucault argues, then one must recognise that some bodies cannot be normalised no matter how they are disciplined, unless the prevailing social and state structures that figuratively and literally rank bodies disintegrate. (James, 1996, p. 27)

Crucial to James's critique is the notion that the materiality of bodies manifests in their resistance to (defiance of) normalisation, as well as in their involuntary attraction of policing/punishment/terror. The surfaces of these deviant bodies compose a particular border that reflects and refracts the institutional border of the prison. Relations of pure force condense at these borders to construct a regime of coercion/spectacle/punishment that parallels and articulates with Foucault's normalising regime of discipline/power/knowledge. This mutual articulation works through the dynamic discursive-material practice of state terror, which renders both territorial and embodied *insides* and *outsides* to existing relations of force. In a critical essay written prior to his eventual release in 1990, Black Panther and political prisoner Dhoruba Bin Wahad elaborates the logic of the police state within formal democracy:

The obvious consequence of a dual standard of human expectation is a unique system of democratic fascism and a permanent condition of police or military repression aimed at the underclass and social dissidents. Limited political 'democracy' is permitted while corporate control of the economy dictates the real content and direction of the state. In this context the specter of racist subjugation resolves itself in an ongoing and continuous cycle of police repression, underclass crime and social deprivation — in other words a permanent state of crisis. (Bin Wahad, 1993, p. 64)

The constant reinscription of the borders that make the inside/outside dichotomy is a necessity of social reproduction: the inside/outside is simultaneously material, physical, and existential, manifesting the manner in which freedom relies on unfreedom to render itself intelligible. The prison, in this sense, must be *somewhere else altogether*, a place alien and incomprehensible to the ideal-typic 'free' person, at the same time that it haunts the imaginary and hovers as intimate, horrific possibility.

Most humans fear the unknown. For those who have not been incarcerated, prisons are dark, fearful places. For those who have been incarcerated and released, prisons are a known factor. Brutal and dehumanising, but survivable. The intimidation and deterrence factor of prison is

served by keeping it distant, remote and unknown, but at the same time a nearby immediate threat of imaginable evil. On the surface, these seem to be contradictory and impossible goals. (Wright, 1999)

Paul Wright here captures the paradox of the prison industrial complex's self-contained discourse of legitimisation. Imprisonment is fundamental to social formation to the extent that it represents the outermost margin of civilised society, housing as it reproduces the embodied excess and excrement of an advanced capitalist, liberal police state.

### **Articulating Wars**

The regime of state terror persistently responds to that which makes a body beyond the bourgeois regime of discipline and normalisation. How the body *looks*, what it *says*, what it *does*, where it *goes* — these are the factors that create and recreate the alien(ated) territory of the prison's inside. Residence under this institutionalised terror necessitates a qualitatively different conception of state power, especially as encounters with authorised violence become routine. Totalising control over the prisoner's body — its mobility, location, contents, behaviours, gestures — consistently surfaces as the core logic of prison discipline, and it is the way in which this allegedly disciplinary apparatus relies on the constant application of physical and psychological violence — in essence, a sometimes sophisticated, often vulgar technology of human torture — that coercively re-shapes the body's form and content. As Marilyn Buck contends, it is precisely the body's passage into this relation of force — a disciplinary structure that *only* exists to legitimate punitive violence — that catalyses the epistemological break necessary for the formation of a unique political antagonism. A permanently endangered liberation discourse precipitates at the collision of agency and repression, generating subversive possibilities to state authority that beg elaboration and exploitation:

At any rate, to include an articulation of how the State and society function to destroy humans from the inside out adds to the analysis of State power [and] repression and ultimately aids in forming strategies to fight the State in order to advance transformative processes of human liberation and justice. Prisoners are in the most brutal of capitalism's institutions. (Buck, private correspondence, 26 November 1999)

The question of opposition obtains a particular urgency under these circumstances. Moving within a terrorised space that renders a constitutive logic of absolute containment, civil death, invisibility to the 'outside', and spiritual incapacitation, the radical prisoner's struggle to communicate — with other prisoners, political allies, family members, supporters and solidarity-seekers on the outside — crashes against the hyper-surveillance of imprisonment and direct political repression. Anti-imperialist Susan Rosenberg thus speaks from the political prison, reconstructing the cognitive territory of incarceration as a site of absolute conflict.

We know that their knowledge of us is a weapon against us. We have

no real options except to say either, 'I will communicate despite them. I will not be silenced', knowing the psychological profile will grow. Or, we can opt to withdraw completely. There is no middle ground. (Rosenberg, 1994, p. 98)

Fuelling the knowledge production of radical prisoners is this fundamental desire for total political engagement: living at the edge of absolute state authority, negotiating the fear and dread that accompany the relative absence of meaningful human intercourse, spurs these oppositional subjects to wage a Gramscian *war of manoeuvre* from the underside of a liberal democratic hegemony.

To the extent that incarceration works to exacerbate rather than assuage, incorporate, or eradicate antagonism to the 'constitutive logic of the system' (Melucci, 1994) in which they languish, imprisoned anti-imperialists, radicals, and revolutionaries inhabit a space that is policed beyond access to the complex of institutions, structures, and discourses that compose the social formation. As the question of the prisoner's 'consent' to state authority falls moot under the prison's absolutist regime, civil death similarly vanquishes the prisoner's ability to participate in the praxis of commonly conceived social change processes. In fact, it may be necessary to now argue that engagement in the kind of protracted, widespread, transformative struggle involved in the typical Gramscian war of position is simply not possible under a relation of total subordination and physical objectification: the radical prisoner's utter lack of mobility and complete subjection to state surveillance imply that the underlying logic of political agency is one of pure opposition to pure force. While the struggle for communication (with people on the outside) implies an attempt to engage *with* a broader war of position — that is, fostering a discourse that symbolically extends *from the inside out* and produces possibilities for transformative interventions in the social formation — these prisoners also strive to envision and fantasise *decisive* conflicts with state terror's regime. The essence of this fantasy is precisely that which Gramsci named as the culmination of the old-time war of manoeuvre.

At times, radical prisoners attempt to articulate their war of manoeuvre (waged against the constitutive logic of the prison itself) *with* the war of position (influenced by the imprisoned, though primarily waged by free people in the terrain of the civil society), conceptualising social transformation through a logic of decisive subversion. This articulation might be seen as the ultimate imaginary of a radical inside-outside solidarity that takes seriously Rosenberg's statement regarding the *lack of a middle ground* within the political terrain of institutionalised, direct state coercion. Stuart Hall's exposition of Gramsci's distinction between the wars of manoeuvre and position helps clarify this point:

First, [Gramsci] drew a distinction between two types of struggle — the 'war of manoeuvre', where everything is condensed into one front and one moment of struggle, and there is a single, strategic breach in the 'enemy's defenses' which, once made, enables the new forces to 'rush in and obtain a definitive (strategic) victory'. Second, there is the 'war of

position', which has to be conducted in a protracted way, across many different and varying fronts of struggle; where there is rarely a single break-through which wins the war at once and for all ... What really counts in a war of position is ... the whole structure of society, including the structures and institutions of civil society. (Hall, 1996, pp. 426–27)

Gramsci thus argues that the generalised historical transition in the West from wars of manoeuvre to wars of position derives from the increasing complexity of civil society, wherein the political terrain is composed of multiple, mobile fronts — a notion resonated by Melucci's conception of shifting and decentralised centres of hegemonic 'constitutive logics' in contemporary information societies. Yet neither Gramsci nor Melucci can account for the persistence of (racialised, gendered) state violence and unmediated coercion within contemporary hegemonies, ranging from local to global.

The multiplicity, mobility, and complexity of contemporary relations of force belie as they facilitate the apparent transformation of state power and social formation into more formally liberal democratic means. Imprisoned radicals remind us that the US liberal hegemony is *structurally overdetermined* by shifting, organic, constitutive relations of force which declare war on particular bodies and places. Thus, the term 'police state democracy' is not the oxymoron that it may appear at first glance. One might add to James's earlier references to workfare and prison other sites of unmediated coercion, exploitation, and low intensity state/corporate warfare: the militarised US-Mexico border, maquilas and sweatshops, Native American reservations, sites of continuing anti-imperialist struggle, and so forth. It is this overdetermination within social formation — the persistent creation and reproduction of coercion as the condition of possibility for producing hegemonic consent — that necessitates the articulation between wars of manoeuvre and wars of position. While the programmatic particularities of this articulation may vary significantly (in the sense that some prisoners profess themselves democratic socialists, others anarchists, still others revolutionary nationalists), radical prisoners visualise the essential relation between the two different kinds of struggle in surprisingly consistent ways. Mutulu Shakur's ruminations visualise the kind of counter-hegemonic praxis that catalyses precisely this critical articulation between the war of manoeuvre and war of position and culminates in a liberatory repulsion of state terror's agents. His juxtaposition of 'paralysis' with 'passion' appropriately captures the possibility (and political necessity) of an epistemological and affective *break* from the punitive carceral regime:

I think 'prison intellectuals', as you call us, must convince folks that without the outside forces [demanding] direct involvement at every level that is now available, within the system ... the direct repression will escalate. The masses on the other hand must be able to meet prisoners who don't fit the stereotypical agenda image of the state. This task calls for contact both ways from inside out and outside in. The overall agenda of the government and its industrial prison complex will be exposed from this position. The next question: will fear paralyse us

or will the passion for human rights drive these pigs into the sea?  
(Shakur, private correspondence, 9 September 1999)

Articulating the war of manoeuvre with the war of position thus constitutes a mode of opposition to the apparatus and context of state terror. Shakur's schema is compelling because it invests agency in the notion of contact at and across prison wall: denaturalising the barrier thus means demystifying its status within the symbolic universe of power and domination. While a humanistic ideal of transcendence has often attempted to 'humanise' the condition of imprisonment (thus reinscribing the state's discourse of legitimacy surrounding such punishment and isolation), 'contact both ways' suggests a collective defiance of state authority, reconstructing a semblance of (political) community in the process of acting against a thickened repression. Rendering the prison wall permeable through a discourse of collective, counter-state political agency produces possibilities beyond reform and state accountability (i.e. human rights discourse). For Shakur and many of his imprisoned peers, this process of contact and deconstruction, 'from inside out and outside in', establishes the necessary political basis for the erosion and ultimate eradication of state terror.

The intellectual context of this kind of utterance is marked by a profound kind of violence, wherein the raw material of the prison's reproduction speaks within and against a relation of force. It seems precisely this subversion of the prison's essential logic — a massive human warehousing marked by the civil, political, existential invisibility of the prisoner her/himself — that initiates a radical break with the common sense of police state democracy. As prison intellectuals inhabit and bleed at the edge of hegemony's invisible underside, a particular way of *knowing power* — as it manifests in domination, resistance, and antagonistic opposition — surfaces as a struggle for coherence amidst apparent chaos and empowerment under a regime of pure subjection. While many have read such prisoners' political formulations as thin polemics and/or nihilistic meanderings, there is in fact a profound idealism embedded in this cognitive praxis. That is, to refuse the legitimacy of one's subjection, to shatter the coerced silence and invisibility of state terror's final solution, is also to imagine the re-making of society in the face of state terror's ultimate failure to totalise social intercourse. Feldman clarifies that the necessary incompleteness of social formation ironically manifests in the dialectic between state violence and resistance:

The growing autonomy of violence as a self-legitimizing sphere of social discourse and transaction points to the inability of any sphere of social practice to totalise society. Violence itself both reflects and accelerates the experience of society as an incomplete project, as something to be made. (Feldman, 1991, p. 5)

This thought partly schematises the intellectual context of a radical prison epistemology: the violence inscribed on the prisoner's body re-surfaces as evidence of historical possibility in resistance, subversion, and opposition to the apparatus and constitutive logic of violence's genesis; knowledge production then becomes a sphere of political praxis for the imprisoned person in



intimate possession of this evidence, and it is exactly this praxis which sustains the articulation between the prisoner's own (individual and collective) fight for survival/freedom and the lurking counter-hegemonic struggle that seeks radical social transformation.

While breaking with the regime of state terror, radical prisoners often lock themselves in a death embrace with the consequences of their defiance. Yet, as Native American political prisoner Leonard Peltier's poem 'the knife of my mind' eloquently conveys, this living death *conditions* — rather than extinguishes — the fundamental desire for agency, freedom, and lived possibility. His self-sustaining creativity marks a refusal to live the prison's time, signifying as well a persistent struggle for identity and knowledge amidst violent emptiness:

I have no present.  
I have only a past  
and, perhaps, a future.  
The present has been taken from me.

I'm left in an empty space whose darkness  
I carve at with the knife of my mind.  
I must carve myself anew  
out of the razor-wire nothingness.

I will know the ecstasy  
and the pain  
of freedom.  
I will be ordinary again.  
Yes, ordinary,  
that terrifying condition,  
where all is possibility,  
where the present exists and must be faced. (Peltier, 1999, p. 33)

### **Conclusion: Incomprehensibility and the Challenge of Engagement**

When I initiated correspondence with a number of imprisoned people (most of them self-identified radicals and/or political prisoners whose status as such is consistently denied by the US government), I had no idea what to expect from a political-intellectual exchange that leaked and filtered through the surveillance, censorship, and embodied force of the US gulag. Many of the people I wrote had been incarcerated for two or more decades, and most had at some point suffered the monochromatic delusions of isolation/segregation/solitary confinement. All had long been labelled by guards, wardens, judges, and parole boards as incorrigibles, terrorists, troublemakers, and political liabilities. All were clearly beating back the programmatic insanity that the prison's hyper-routinisation and coercive bodily discipline were intended to yield.

Reeking the coercive relations of the prison, our ongoing exchanges continue to speak the language of terror. My correspondents often struggle to make the theoretical and metaphorical manoeuvres necessary to illustrate the

central paradox of our attempt to forge a meaningful (if individualised) inside-outside relation: that is, 'How can one communicate a condition that is necessarily *incomprehensible*?' Chrystos remarks in the above passage that the terror of the prison follows her always, permeating her experience as a free person. Marilyn Buck asserts the failure of the senses, the utter impotence of rationality in negotiating and surviving prison terror as one of the caged:

In truth prisoners reflect the overall social conditions — a distillation or concentration of the worst effects of capitalism on human beings, as well as the strengths we humans have to endure injustice and cruelty. So, we are you. Except that we ... live in a world that is incomprehensible at the subjective level to anyone who has not experienced imprisonment and almost absolute loss of control over one's self. Further I would say that because the experience is devastating, the former prisoner can or does forget this world unless she or he consciously struggles to remember it. There are days when, even after more than 18 years of prison I still find the arbitrary viciousness of the system mind-boggling and incomprehensible (but then I have always had a hard time emotionally understanding cruelty and hating others for class, race, gender, etc. ...). (Buck, private correspondence, 23 September 1999)

Lingering thoughts and fantasies of freedom sometimes inflict severe pain while inspiring hope for personal and collective liberation-in-struggle. It becomes impossible to render this endangered knowledge production romantic or conventionally 'transcendent' when it so often obliterates the conventional telos of literary, political, and academic discourses. Lacking the tangible alternatives necessary for formulating typical vindicating narratives, imprisoned radicals consistently refuse to dispense with the terror that accompanies a defiant optimism of the will. In an especially poignant passage from his *Prison Writings*, Leonard Peltier allegorises the limits of his own coherence as a political subject in the domain of invisibility:

You never get used to prison life. In my sleep I hear people's voices, some of them long dead, like my father. Such voices are torture. To wonder every day, every hour, whether or not you will *ever* be free again is a very special form of torture. It takes its daily, hourly toll on your heart and in your soul, particularly when you have to explain to your grandson why they won't let you out to attend his soccer game. It eats you up inside to hear his little boy's voice ask, 'Grandpa, why don't you just *finish* your sentence?' He thought my sentence was just a whole lot of words I had to write, like copying a sentence over and over for a punishment assignment at his grade school. He couldn't understand that my sentence continues for twice my natural life. (Peltier, 1999, p. 29)

It seems, then, that incomprehensibility manifests as a discursive linchpin — rather than as an epistemological gap within — this subaltern knowledge production. The fear of not being *able to know*, of one's own psychic/bodily experience being somehow outside the realm of communicability, precisely marks the point at which state terror collides with that slippery and stubborn thing we name as political agency. The necessary incompleteness of domi-

nation mirrors the ultimate failure of epistemology to fully comprehend the regimentation and alien control of one's very existence.

A lengthy passage from imprisoned anti-imperialist Ray Luc Levasseur's letter dated 2 October 1999, illustrates the clash between terror and disobedience. Profound is the manner in which he dramatises the failure of state punishment and repression to destroy and erase political subjects, while simultaneously interpellating them through the constant threat of extinction. It is important to note that Levasseur's descriptions resonate deeply with countless prisoners who have felt utterly misplaced upon re-entering, or even encountering fragments of, the free world.

Salut Dylan — Your Aug 30 missive w/enclosure just caught up with me last week. Fortunately it just caught the tail end of a 10-day mail forwarding. Everything after 10 days was returned to sender — letters, periodicals, papers, etc. — which I'm still not even close to straightening out. I was in a deep, dark news vacuum for several weeks, conditions for me have deteriorated, and I'm treading the gulag waters simply trying to get from one week to next. Things started well enough approx 6 weeks ago and then got worse in a hurry. I must keep check on the length of this missive — writing supplies being very restricted — but let me give you a brief update and respond to a couple of points in your letter. I finally left Administrative Maximum (ADX) on 8/20. Hell of a thing — all those years of seeing nothing but walls and small patch of overhead blue — and then in a moment's notice I'm barreling down the road in a vehicle with barred windows, trying to take in all the sights. Colors, especially. I don't recognise the makes/models of most vehicles any more. Mountains in the distance. At close range — homes, trailers, fast food joints, stores, billboards, signs, open range, lots of fences — but not many trees. I wanted trees. I never felt like I was *part* of what I saw. Too many years of isolation/exile. Chains too tight. Altitude — that area of So. Colorado is saturated with prisons. Approx 20 miles to Pueblo, CO — then by air to Federal Transfer Center — Oklahoma City, OK. FTC looks like a slave market — shackled prisoners standing on elevated platform having the inside of their mouths examined by rent-a-cops. I got yanked from line, brought to the front, perfunctorily processed and placed directly in SHU (segregation/the hole). I'm classified 'max custody' — that's not good. I'm always blackboxed ('security' device clamped over the cuffs — makes it feel like your wrists be in the jaws of a canine), and I'm put in seg wherever I'm held over. 10 days in OK City seg. Left there on 8/30 — arriving at US penitentiary/Atlanta on same day (former pp's held in Atlanta — Socialist Party Leader Eugene V. Debs; the anarchist Alexander Bookman; the great Puerto Rican Independence leader Pedro Albizu Campos). ... I was taken immediately to SHU (seg/hole) upon arrival — where I remain to this day, with no prospects of being let into general population any time soon. I was given a 'review' on 8/31. I was told they don't like what I am nor what I represent. They don't like my political beliefs and

political associations (conveniently labeled 'terrorist'). They don't like that I was underground so long. They don't like the alleged 'special capabilities' I'm supposed to have (what — exercising First Amendment rights!). And they don't like that I was locked-down at Marion and ADX for so many years (apparently they don't believe in their own propaganda re: the effectiveness of ADX's step-program to make prisoners more manageable, more controllable, and more fit for a less restrictive prison. No, *that* propaganda they put out for media/public consumption). So they buried me in seg — indefinitely. Go lay down for 4 months, they said, then they'll take another look at me. They said 'if' they ever decide to let me in gen. pop. I'll have so many restrictions placed upon me I won't be able to piss without them knowing about it. Jeez — I don't feel very welcome here. The result is I'm deeply buried in seg — with no definite end in sight. If that weren't bad enough, the conditions in seg are deplorable. There's terrible overcrowding. Two bunk/2 man cells are often tripled up with third man sleeping on the floor (for weeks at a time). I'm told there's a court order prohibiting this practice — but the administration ignores it. 18 months ago the front page of the Atlanta Constitution proclaimed that torture was routine in USP-Atlanta's seg unit — in the form of 4-point restraints being used as *punishment* (rather than to control extremely violent/suicidal prisoners). There's presently a class action suit on that. Like other seg units there's been too many assaults by guards on handcuffed prisoners. There's constant outages/shortages of hygiene supplies, cleaning supplies, clothing, bedding, writing supplies. The phone is more out-of-order than in order (when it's operational — supposed to get one 15-minute call per month). Anyway — bad situation. (Levasseur, private correspondence, 2 October 1999)

Levasseur's passages between states of confinement mark the constitutive limits of the aforementioned articulation between struggles in and outside the prison proper. State terror, as it inscribes a self-contained regime on *imprisoned* bodies and subjectivities, coerces a form of departure from the presumed 'social' of social formation.

As they are (sometimes literally) buried beneath the complex web of discourses, institutions, and power relations that compose social formation, prisoners encounter a cognitive territory outside common sense, beyond the symbolic and rational universe of civil society. Inhabiting this world apart fosters a way of knowing that holds, in its enactment and elaboration, possibilities for radical antagonism in defiance of punishment, segregation, and sensory deprivation. Here, the political and intellectual challenge for activists, intellectuals, and teachers in the free world is to discover and create modes of engagement with a knowledge production that implicates the terror lurking in freedom's midst.

*Dylan Rodríguez may be contacted at the University of California, Riverside, e-mail: dylan.rodriguez@ucr.edu.*

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