

12 Carceral enjoyments and killjoying the social life of social death

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Introduction: "No prison is safe for no one"

During the summer of 2012, CeCe McDonald, a transwoman of color, survived a racist and transphobic attack by a white supremacist in Minneapolis, MN. Like many survivors of such gendered violence, McDonald was criminalized and subsequently convicted of second-degree manslaughter for defending herself (Richie, 1996; Richie, 2012). And like nearly all incarcerated transwomen in the United States, she was sentenced to serve her imprisonment in a men's prison, despite her gender identification as a woman (Pearce, 2012). Her incarceration galvanized supporters both inside and outside prison who organized alongside McDonald, eventually securing her release in 2014, after she accepted a plea agreement. McDonald's experience of being violently attacked, of being criminalized by the state for defending her life, of fighting for her freedom, and her life since her release is also now the subject of a documentary film made by the filmmaker Jac Gares, *Free CeCe*. In that film, in press interviews, public lectures, her letters from prison, and in other writings, McDonald has become a powerful critic of the criminal punishment system in the United States, and in particular, how that system targets queer, trans★, trans-femme, and transwomen of color already subjected to state and interpersonal violence for merely appearing in public (McDonald, 2015, 2017).

While McDonald was incarcerated in Minneapolis, she was held for long durations in so-called "protective custody," ostensibly for her own safety from sexual assault by other incarcerated people. Protective custody is at best a euphemism for solitary confinement, and more precisely a form of punitive isolation and torture (Zurn, 2019). Speaking at a conference in 2014, she was asked how she felt about how her case has been used to spotlight the conditions of transwomen incarcerated in men's facilities. She answered:

I know people kind of want to sensationalize the fact that I was a transwoman in a men's prison ... I just want to say that all prisons are fucked up. It wouldn't matter if I went to a women's prison ... you know, they're talking about building a new trans prison in California? It's like, no prison is safe for no one. You want to capitalize off of me through a fucked

up system? And I'm not having it. ... I would rather die than go to any prison. ... There is no way that you can convince me that being in a men's prison or being in a women's prison, or being in a trans prison, being in a fucking unicorn prison, I don't care. It's not beneficial to anyone. It's not beneficial me, it's not beneficial to you, it's not beneficial to our community. And that's where the truth lies. ... But think about all the other people who are in prison. ... Let's remind ourselves, there are still people in there who are struggling, and we have to be in solidarity with them.

(McDonald, 2014a)

McDonald's answer reflects the long, but often unacknowledged, tradition of radical queer, trans, and women of color critique of the state that has been a central part of liberation struggles since at least the late 1960s in the United States, in response to pervasive state and non-state violence against them (Hobson, 2016).¹ Quite simply, the critique holds that the modern state is a primary source of normalizing violence, that this is not a failure but rather its essence, and as such, the inclusion of "difference" into that system on its terms continues and maintains that violence. Elsewhere, I have argued that McDonald's analysis of her own experience and the overlapping carceral systems in which she is captured can be understood within the tradition of critical genealogy, and as an exemplary instance of what I term abolitionist genealogy. In giving a critical redescription of her own experiences of criminalization, incarceration, and survival, McDonald critically re-describes the dominant description of her own incarceration—disrupting violent understandings of terms such as "safety"—demonstrating the simultaneous subject and object positions she inhabits.²

In this essay, however, I return to McDonald's analysis to foreground its particular *affect* in responding to a question about how she experienced being "out of compliance" with the violent gender binary imposed on her by the state (Girshick, 2011).³ I argue that both the *content* and *manner* of her response models an abolitionist response to what might be thought of as a contemporary articulation of W.E.B. Du Bois' 1901 formulation of the "ever unasked question": "How does it *feel* to be a problem?" (Du Bois, 1997) It is an intentionally and powerfully disruptive response not merely to the facts of incarceration, but to affective attachments held by those who continue to believe that incarceration can be reformed. In response, and in her wider commentary and writing, McDonald confronts the simultaneous material politics of incarceration in the United States and a part of its key affective scripts: *the powerful desire for prison reform*, especially in its most progressive forms, to address the suffering of incarcerated people without questioning the prison itself.

One of the (many) problems faced by prison abolitionists, police abolitionists, and anti-carceral theorists and activists is *enjoyment*. There is a persistent problem that putatively "innocent" members of society receive identifiable material, psychic, and symbolic benefits and privileges from mass incarceration and its direct relation to hetero-patriarchal white supremacy in the United States. They (read: "we" persons that are less subjected to confinement and state supervision)

also *enjoy* these benefits and privileges. They/We enjoy specific material and affective enjoyments from the confinement, torture, exile, disenfranchisement, and generalized forms of social and civil death visited upon others throughout the carceral archipelago in the United States. Those committed to the abolition of such a system must confront such enjoyments, not because they are deserving of respect (they are not), but because they represent a serious obstacle to abolitionist and decolonial projects.

McDonald's analysis is an identifiable *kind* of political-epistemological work that is a necessary (yet insufficient) part of the work of building the "abolition-democracy." The term, "abolition-democracy" comes from W.E.B. Du Bois, and it has been taken up subsequently by theorists such as Angela Davis, George Lipsitz, and the late Joel Olson as a project of world building, in which Black liberation would be positively assured beyond the "negative" freedom of 19th century emancipation (Davis, 2005; Du Bois, 1995; Lipsitz, 2004; Olson, 2004).⁴ It is my claim that a part of this project requires the disruption of pleasures and enjoyments that depend on the continued functioning of the prison as a site of moral and political differentiation. And moreover, that such a disruption must also target the very *desire* to save, perfect, and protect the prison with reformist programs and well-intentioned progressive models of inclusion that continue to accept the premise that prison can be made safe for anyone.

Specifically, I trace a series of claims that together insist on the necessity of identifying, confronting, and disrupting what I will call "carceral enjoyments." Such enjoyments are produced as parasitic forms of social life, "purchased" through the racialized social death of others, effected in our contemporary moment by the practice of incarceration. If we want to disrupt the functioning of the white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal, and settler-colonial state formation in which we find ourselves, we need to be attendant to the specific pleasures or enjoyments of carcerality—the parasitic social life produced by the social death of confinement—and actively develop strategies to disrupt those pleasures and enjoyments. Recognizing both our material and affective attachments to such carceral enjoyments lets us cultivate and redistribute certain kinds of "bad feeling," and embrace certain ways of "killing joy." Becoming an abolitionist killjoy, I will argue, is a necessary (but insufficient) part of abolitionist projects and ought to be embraced rather than avoided. This means supporting killjoys, becoming killjoys ourselves, and above all, ceding the floor to those best situated and able to disrupt the flow of the "good feelings" of carcerality, *including the good feeling of "reform."*

To make this case I explicate three conceptual claims and offer a normative model of abolitionist practice.⁵ First, as claimed by critical carceral studies scholars, I describe how incarceration in the U.S. is diagnosed as an institution of social death. Incarceration unites civil and social death through the ethno-racial prison as a site of social death-making, marking the U.S. social order as governed by white supremacy. As a result, these scholars argue that the paradigmatic socially dead figure is less "the slave" than "the prisoner." Second, by linking this model of social death in the U.S. to scholarship demonstrating

how the defense of “property” itself is a function of building and maintaining whiteness as property (through its protection by the police), I show how the social death of incarceration is white supremacist in essence. Racial capitalism defines the United States and abolitionist projects must reflect this reality. Third, I argue that there is another “side” of social death: namely social life produced through social death, and in the U.S. one form of this is parasitic specifically on the social death of incarceration and confinement. This parasitic social life I will mark as “carceral enjoyments.” A key part of how these “enjoyments of property” operate is through an epistemological block, or what philosophers of race and gender refer to as an epistemology of ignorance. Lastly, I identify one possible resource for frustrating the social life of social death: to disrupt carceral enjoyments and frustrate the flows of affective pleasures which are attached to them through a political epistemological project of supporting and becoming “killjoys.” Borrowing from Sara Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy, I re-read McDonald (and her answer to the question of how it feels to be a problem) as a powerful abolitionist killjoy, and think toward what a practice of abolitionist kill-joying might look like as part of a broader project of building abolition-democracy.

From civil to social death/from slavery to incarceration

As Orlando Patterson describes it, slavery is the paradigmatic form of social death: the internal exclusion of persons from sociality through natal alienation (Patterson, 1982). This is a stripping of not simply one’s legal rights but also the destruction of inter-generational social relations that would otherwise be grounded by birth and an understanding of *kinship* that produces a lineage itself across time. To be a slave, Patterson writes, was to be “truly a genealogical isolate” and be removed not simply from society, but from any meaningful relation to a social past or collective future (Patterson, 1982, p. 5).⁶ As Perry Zurn describes it, social death is always “out of sync with physical death” and “may belong to whoever—or indeed whatever—lives and dies in a network of relation” (Zurn, 2020). Social death is, therefore, an abjected position *within* social relations and which is co-constitutive of those relations as domination.⁷

But to diagnose the practice of *incarceration*—i.e. the forced confinement and isolation of stigmatized persons from their existing kinship and social relations—as producing *social* death requires an expansion or reworking of Patterson’s analysis. Specifically, it moves beyond the more common legalistic framework typically employed in critical prison studies of what Colin Dayan calls the “legal fiction” of “civil” or “civic” death (Dayan, 2005).⁸ The framework of civil death has long been used as a framework to describe the stripping of *political* rights as part of state-based punishment. This legal fiction occurs *directly* as a fact of incarceration in that political rights—such as those of assembly, speech, public appearance—are immediately disrupted by forced confinement. And it occurs indirectly, marking so-called “collateral consequences” of conviction and incarceration. In the United States the paradigmatic form of civic

death is the stripping of definitive “democratic” rights of self-governance such as suffrage, jury service, and eligibility to hold public office (Chin, 2012; Dilts, 2014; Ewald, 2002, 2012; Grady, 2012; Holloway, 2014; Karlan, 2004; Manza et al., 2004). These exclusions presume, of course, that the civically dead person was already a full member of civil society.

What has emerged in the critical scholarship on incarceration and collateral consequences, however, are repeated arguments linking *civic* death in relation to Patterson’s theory of *social* death, tying the legal fiction of civic death to the natal alienation of social death. Roughly, we can see separate these arguments into two broad camps. The first camp takes the two forms of death (civic and social) to be conceptually distinct but related in some specific way, while the second camp insists that any conceptual distinction between them has been collapsed through specific legal transformation. At stake here is (1) the relationship between law and natal alienation (i.e. are the legal processes of rights restrictions thought to be distinct from social processes of natal alienation?), and (2) the role that race plays in these accounts (i.e. at what level of social process is race formed and maintained in relation to the law?).

Within the first camp, civil and social death are connected through the practice of incarceration in a variety of forms. Three kinds of connections stand out: as analogical, as counterparts, and as symptom. For paradigmatic examples of each, we can briefly look at three accounts produced by critical prison scholars in the last 20 years. First, Loïc Wacquant argues that incarceration produces *civic* death analogously to slavery’s production of *social* death: “Just as bondage effected the ‘social death’ of imported African captives and their descendants on American soil *mass incarceration also induces the civic death* of those it ensnares by extruding them from the social compact” (Wacquant, 2001, p. 119). For Wacquant, the formation of a series of “peculiar” institutions operates as a structural homology for the management of labor extraction and political rule. As such, a “redundant population” is produced and then socially isolated from the formal economy, managed through a series of successive institutions: chattel slavery, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and now, the prison/hyper-ghetto.

Second, Caleb Smith argues that the civic death of the prisoner is the “counterpart” to the social death of the slave, and the two function *together* in the antebellum south as “intrusive” (bringing the slave *in*) and “extrusive” (forcing the convict *out*) representations of social death, thus modifying Patterson’s own account of the two ways in social death could be represented (as intrusive and extrusive) (Smith, 2009, p. 44).⁹ Third, Joshua Price argues that whereas civil death is restricted to the legal realm, social death “goes beyond” civil death and “includes the suspension of those [legal] rights” (Price, 2015, p. 19). Civil death is, according to Price’s extensive interview-based study of prison and jail conditions in the United States, a symptom of social death.

As each of these approaches implies but does not always state expressly, the peculiar connection between civil and social death, however, cannot be read in isolation from the legal history of chattel slavery and its “abolition” in the mid-19th century. Each approach notes deep connections between the legal fiction

of civil death and social death, yet at the same time these approaches all insist that the two categories remain conceptually distinct, if nevertheless related. If we *foreground* the historical, material, and legal connection, as Joy James argues, then any conceptual distinction in the postbellum United States between social and civic death becomes untenable (James, 2005). The express authorization of involuntary servitude as punishment for a crime in the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution draws civic and social death together through the ongoing connection between abjected blackness and criminality, even as it operates under a mask of racial neutrality under the law. In contrast to the aforementioned relationships (as analogical, as counter-parts, or as symptom), James' reading emphasizes the relationship between civil and social death as a *transformation* through which racialized bodies are targeted by colorblind social policy through racialized enforcement and exploitation.

A weak form of this argument drives what has become the popular center-left understanding of the Prison Industrial Complex as a reconfiguration of slavery under a new form (or as a "new Jim Crow"). But James' reading of the transformation effected by the 13th Amendment is stronger: this loophole does not merely *allow* for racially discriminatory practice to continue under different terms, but rather, that the social death of slavery is written into the civil death of incarceration, *transforming social death into a permanent legal category* and signifying both criminality and blackness as inseparable. James writes:

Congress resurrected social death as a permanent legal category in U.S. life, yet no longer registered the socially dead with the traditional racial markings. Breaking with a two-hundred-year-old tradition, the government ostensibly permitted the enslavement of nonblacks. Now not the ontological status of "n*****" [redacted] but the ontological status of "criminal" renders one a slave. Yet, as became apparent in the convict prison lease system, blackness remained the signifier of social death, although now all those relegated to prisons would be imbued with that pariah race status. (James, 2005, pp. xxviii–xxix)

At this point in history, the prison thus reflects both (1) existing ethno-racial divisions, and (2) also (re)produces ethno-racial distinctions under the sign of "criminal justice," produced through an ontological and semiotic exchange produced by the exception in the 13th Amendment.¹⁰ As Brady Heiner argues, the prison produces social death as the "postbellum sedimentation of the institution of slavery" (Heiner, 2007, p. 219), through the "semiotic transfer of social death across contexts from the postbellum period to the present practices of mass incarceration, which predominantly and disproportionately target black and other people of color" (Heiner, 2015, p. 38).¹¹

These stronger readings of the relationship between civic and social death are helpful because they reflect *how* racial categories themselves were made and re-made through natal alienation in the U.S., pushing past models that rely on relatively static understandings of civil and legal processes as "applied"

to persons rather than as “making” persons. That is, one of the things which distinguishes the second set of approaches is how their accounts follow a conception of race and race-making that acknowledges how race is a social *and* legal construction: various markers of difference are given political and social meaning and then used to justify and create differential outcomes along those markers of difference. The “fiction” of race does not make it unreal, but rather it is a fiction that is enforced through violence, especially in state-based forms of criminalization and incarceration.¹²

As such, incarceration is read by scholars as already an institution of racialized domination and always already an institution of *simultaneous* social and civic death. Moreover, by taking up this view on the production of social death—overlapping and coincident with civic death through the re-inscription of natal alienation onto the “post” slavery category of “the criminal”—this approach opens a more specific account of social death in the United States than Patterson provides, and lets us trace the interconnected conceptual, historical, and practical links between the legal production of racialized difference, practices of state punishment, and democratic legitimacy with the production of social death. As Lisa Cacho puts it in her study of the criminalization of migrant populations in the United States, social death marks being, “*ineligible for personhood*—as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (Cacho, 2012, p. 6; original emphasis). Such an approach helps us to identify the forms of social and legal “life” which the racialized social death of incarceration produces. This is a more flexible and capacious understanding of social death, and more able to address instances of social death outside of Patterson’s original object of study (and hopefully in a way that is more materially based on the experiences of incarcerated persons).

The whiteness of police/the whiteness of property

I want to make a stronger and more specific claim: under the specific legal structure produced in the postbellum United States, social death becomes intimately tied to the production of *whiteness* as property (following Cheryl Harris), to the political system of *white supremacy* (following Charles Mills), and to the enforcement of law as the enforcement of ethno-racial distinctions (following Nikhil Singh) (Harris, 1993; Mills, 1997; Singh, 2014). To try and render a person as socially and civically dead in the United States is to try and strip them of (or bar them from) the property of *whiteness*.¹³ A key root of *political authority* itself in this context derives its legitimacy from a Lockean conception of property as an extension of self-ownership.¹⁴ But such self-ownership, as Carole Pateman has demonstrated, was already restricted to male-masculine persons in theory as well as practice, and as Charles Mills has likewise shown, partially productive of Whiteness itself (Pateman, 1988). As Ashon Crawley puts it, “Whiteness is a capacity for possession as the grounds for identity, and we learn from indigenous and settler colonial studies that the settler state stakes its

claim on the acceptance of violence, the claim of property that produces a displacement from land, a violent encounter with people” (Crawley, 2017, p. 6). The settler state’s legitimacy is contingent on its ability to deploy *punitive* power for the protection of such property. To defend property with the force of law (i.e. punishment) is to defend it against property-less “thieves,” “savages,” and “idiots” who do not abide “reason.” The differential work of identifying non-propertyed others is, in Lockean terms, already a process of criminalizing and policing non-white persons on gendered, ablest, and patriarchal terms (Cacho, 2012, pp. 24–25; Clifford, 2014; Dilts, 2012b; Pateman, 1988).

State racism ought to be understood therefore, not simply as discriminatory conduct, mere exclusion from the polity, or an affective grounds of dislike or abjection, but rather what Cacho calls, “a killing abstraction” that prescribes specific actions and corresponding affective scripts (Cacho, 2012, p. 7).¹⁵ The defense of property, with the force of biological and social death under such terms, becomes a defense of whiteness itself (or at the very least an attempt to *become* white or *appeal* to whiteness’ authority). This is the heart of what it means to assume deputization to enforce and to protect such property: to become the *police*.¹⁶ To be deputized into such a system (by choice or assumption) is to align with whiteness and claim protection *as* white. As Frank Wilderson puts it: “Whiteness, then, and by extension civil society ... must first be understood as a social formation of contemporaries who do not magnetize bullets ... In short, white people are not simply ‘protected’ by the police, they *are*—in *their very corporeality*—the police” (Wilderson, 2003, p. 20; original emphasis).

Nikhil Singh offers a sustained reading of this linkage (between whiteness and police), arguing that in the United States:

Police action ... developed along the continuum of racial management that moved from biopolitical inclusion (an ever-graduating whiteness) to necropolitical destruction of entire communities (genocide). It is important here to understand the production of whiteness as an active and ongoing social process—one built on a prior history of racial differentiation, but one that also worked by generating new distinctions.

(Singh, 2014, p. 1093)

For Singh, the specific historical trajectory out of which U.S. police forces developed out of slave patrols and citizen militia is simultaneously a project of the redistribution of violence from the public to the state as well as an epistemological project of repressing the history of settler-colonial white violence (Singh, 2014, p. 1093). Singh extends key claims of critical race theory (again drawing on the work of Harris and Mills) to read whiteness as a property relation that is integral to the formation and maintenance of white supremacy as a political system which differentially assigns rights and privileges both according to a color-line which is always also a project of reproducing (and redrawing) that color-line. Centrally, the (re)production of racial difference in and through *private* property relations (and the accumulation and circulation

of capital predicated on the alienation of labor) lets us recognize this as a part of what Cedric Robinson terms, “racial capitalism” (Kelley, 2017; Melamed, 2015; C.J. Robinson, 2000).¹⁷ As Robinson explains, there is both a longer history of the political technology of race shaping capitalism, and also a deeper connection between race and class than typically acknowledged by scholars (especially Marxists in the United States). The Black radical tradition, Robinson shows, offers a powerful corrective to this mistake. Attending to the particular ways that the state enforces property law—in and through punitive systems that are raced and gendered—sheds light on *how* this works in the United States historically.¹⁸

As Singh explains, the production of a racial binary, and the political assignment of persons to political positions within that binary, is itself the work of the Anglo-American racial capitalism project:

Neither blackness nor whiteness is ... strictly reducible to specific white people or black people. Rather, whiteness and blackness as well as other modern racial forms emerge as subject positions, habits of perception, and modes of embodiment that develop from the ongoing risk management of settler and slave capitalism, and more generally racial capitalism (i.e., capitalism). ... [A] sharply dualist conception of blackness and whiteness accrues special force within the Anglo-American variant of capitalism that attains global reach in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

(Singh, 2014, p. 1096)

There are two key moves here: first Singh argues that whiteness functions as a system that is deeply intertwined with specific practices of governance (risk management, settler colonialism, state/slave capitalism, etc.). This is a more general claim, and one which could be used as an analytic device to think about various manifestations of “whiteness” in different historical and geographical contexts. Second, Singh argues that this *particular* manifestation as *the* system of racial domination in the Anglo-American context takes its specific form as blackness and whiteness (where the political structure of authority maps to existing markers of difference to define those subject positions in concrete ways, e.g. de facto and de jure segregation, practices of chattel slavery and the rise of state-organized police forces in the post bellum period in the U.S.). Singh’s analysis demonstrates how there is an inseparable genealogical and conceptual connection between whiteness and policing itself that, as suggested by Wilderson, cannot be undone merely through the inclusion of otherwise “non-white” persons into police forces or offices of the state under racial capitalism.

This stronger reading acknowledges that whiteness is at the core of the liberal rule-of-law tradition in the United States. Moreover this reading indicates that social and civil death have become co-constitutive with social order and civil society more generally, and are enacted through the violence of policing and natal alienation of punitive confinement.¹⁹ As Dylan Rodríguez argues, the “well-functioning white-multicultural civil society” functions *through* the

prison as a “focused site of massive black/brown disappearance and disintegration” (Rodríguez, 2004, pp. 201–2). That is, the hegemonic form of civil society functions *not in spite of* racialized social death, but *through it*. The ethno-racial prison has become part-and-parcel with liberal and progressive visions of multicultural civil society in a foundational way.²⁰ This means that proposals which appeal to such visions of liberal and multicultural society (or which refer to some idyllic period before “mass incarceration” took hold) do so as ways to ultimately avoid addressing the underlying connections between the social death of incarceration itself and the production of that meaning.

These linkages—of whiteness to property to civil society to the force of law and to the production of racialized social death—are an historical and material contingency: a *political* ontology. That which “is” should be understood as “has become” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 12). And in contrast to Patterson’s general accounting of social death, which is not tied in such specific ways, social death *in the Anglo-American* context is such that anti-Black racism, patriarchal authority, and settler-colonial genocide are rightly a part of the tradition of “American” liberalism and not merely an aberration to it. This is what should allow us to understand the ease with which “blackness” and “criminality” could be so easily linked throughout U.S. history, because *criminality* has been deployable as a “stable” marker of social, political, and moral difference that could in turn shore up encroachments against white supremacy (Dilts, 2012a; Holloway, 2014; Muhammad, 2010; Murakawa, 2014).

Just as the antebellum United States was a *slave society*, multicultural civil society in the United States today *has become a prison society*, and U.S. democracy functions as a “penal democracy” (James, 2005, p. xxi) or a “prison nation” (Richie, 2012). This social and political order functions under white supremacy as a political system that relies on the policing of property relations, articulated through its criminal punishment system even if this functioning is masked by the rhetoric of liberal inclusion and color-blind “justice.” This implies that most prison “reform” agendas—those that seek to address only the most egregious practices of the prison-industrial-complex, those that focus only on the “innocent” or “non-violent” offenders, or those that aim at some “correct” level of incarceration—operate through the disavowal of the prison itself as an instrument of racialized social death (Gilmore, 2015; Wilderson, 2003). Thus, we can provisionally assert that contemporary forms of social death thus function *narrowly* through the practice of confinement itself, *broadly* through the criminalization of non-white persons, and *extensively* through the law itself and its models of legal change via “reform” (Petersen, 2020).

“The other side of social death”²¹/carceral enjoyments

To date, the single best critical-theoretical account of the social death effected by incarceration is Lisa Guenther’s study of solitary confinement in the United States (Guenther, 2013). Guenther shows how extreme isolation and solitary confinement of persons destroys the conditions of inter-subjective relationality

and, in turn, meaningful subjectivity. Isolation itself is generative of a “forced self-betrayal,” properly described by those who have been forced to experience it, as the nightmare of *living death* (Guenther, 2013, p. 214). As such, for Guenther social death occurs with the confinement of corporal beings (including non-human animals). Such attention to the lived experience of social death is a vital contribution to our understanding, reminding readers that the nightmare of social death must never be reduced to a mere “theoretical abstraction” (Brown, 2009, p. 1233).²²

Guenther, through giving the floor to people subjected to the violence of isolation and confinement in its extreme forms, shows how the boundary between life and death is marked by an aporia. As the incarcerated philosopher Spoon Jackson puts it, “Like Socrates, I was sentenced to death. Not at the height of my wisdom and awareness, but at the age of twenty. I was tried for the death penalty thirty-five years ago and given the other death penalty of life without parole. A slower death, more hideous, because I do suffer death, sometimes daily, and it is a living death” (Jackson, 2014).²³ Yet, this *living death* of solitary confinement is itself full of life: that is its punishment. And it is to Guenther’s credit that her account of social death also carries with it an account of resistance. She maps specific ways that some individuals placed under these conditions do in fact *live* despite their torture. They are often able to stave off the complete destruction of self that is typical of solitary confinement. Social life, as a mode of resistance can thus become a counter-movement to social death, even in diminished forms as “coping mechanisms” (Guenther, 2013, pp. 214–20, 220). People held in solitary confinement create art and literature for themselves and others, they speak, and in their most powerful refusals of their condition—as seen in the widespread hunger-strikes throughout 2013 across California organized entirely by incarcerated people under the most restrictive of conditions—they engage in political action in arguably paradigmatically Arendtian terms (Guenther, 2015). There is an incredibly powerful social *life* of those positioned as socially *dead*.

But what Guenther does not explore at length, and which is largely (but not completely) absent in the critical literature linking incarceration to social death and natal alienation, is another side of the social life produced by social death. Namely, the ways that incarceration, criminalization, civic death, and broader practices of carcerality produced social death produce the social life, political membership, and the freedom of non-incarcerated and so-called “innocent” persons. In distinction from the resistant forms of social life enacted by incarcerated persons, this other production of social life is *parasitic*: purchased by those who are “free” through the suffering of the socially dead through specific material practices of de-humanization and de-animalization. Or, as Guenther does put it provocatively at one point, “The social death of prisoners sticks to the social life of those who have not ever set foot in a prison and could not possibly know what it is like” (Guenther, 2013, p. 255).

Guenther is not the first to note this production, of course. As Stephen Dillon puts it, drawing on Assata Shakur’s account of her incarceration, “The spaces of the prison, ghetto, and home ... collude with each other, composing

an expansive grid of captivity that immobilizes and disposes of racialized and gendered populations. If Shakur's jail captures some, it also immunizes other bodies from such routine abjection and social death, thus securing capital, whiteness, and white life" (Dillon, 2018, p. 117). This logic of immunization rests on the idea that a body can be made stronger and healthier through the controlled presence of some acceptable level of a weakened pathogen. The life of the immunized body is strengthened naturally by the production of "antibodies" that are resilient to the pathogen. The "pathogen" remains *within* the body, but always in a controlled condition for the sake of producing immunity for the body. Seeing the jail and its practices of racialized and gendered capture, abjection, and social death shows how it becomes seen as *necessary* to the maintenance of the otherwise fragile bodies of capital, whiteness, and white life.

To acknowledge how social death "sticks" to social life in this way, attempting (yet possibly always already failing) to immunize some through the capture and domination of others, illustrates two important forms of social life: a resistant form (produced under the conditions of social death, reflecting the agency of the oppressed, the enslaved, and the captive) and a parasitic form (produced by social death, "purchased" at the expense of the socially dead).²⁴ As Patterson describes it, human parasitism is the attempt to *live off* another's social life through the killing abstraction of social death. This involves decidedly non-abstract practices of domination, alienation, and subordination, both violent and quotidian. A parasite's life thus becomes dependent on the host, but often in ways that are camouflaged, supporting the life of the parasite under that cover.²⁵ Such camouflage may account for the way, as Guenther notes, individuals live in a prison society, *even if they do not realize it*, living off of practices of solitary confinement and natal alienation: turning selves against selves.

If this is the case—that the prison itself functions today as an instrument of social death that parasitically produces social life under the terms of white supremacy—then this forces us to ask new questions: what does it mean to be attached to forms of social life produced by practices of social death? What does it mean to be attached to the enjoyment of such a life? What does it mean to be unable to confront such enjoyments because they not only are difficult to know, but to acknowledge them would implicate the enjoyment of one's own life in the reproduction of social death and maintenance of suffering? What if the problem we face is not simply that social death is produced and maintained through incarceration, but also that *enjoyable forms of freedom and social life* are produced which are dependent on the social and civic death of others.²⁶

The social life produced by social death is an instance of what Saidiya Hartman calls a, "property of enjoyment" (Hartman, 1997; Hartman & Wilderson, 2003). Suffering, Hartman argues, is "enjoyed" both consciously and unconsciously by people in positions of authority and privilege. They build deep investments in the social world that is produced by that suffering and which cannot simply be abolished without disrupting those forms of privilege directly. Privileges cannot be merely redistributed or formerly subordinated persons included into authority to undue these investments. Rather, as her

analysis of chattel slavery in the 19th century shows, the legal status of the slave as a thing, as a property, indelibly links the “use” of that property to its “enjoyment.” The fungibility of the slave as an interchangeable commodity was the basis of the “joy” experienced by the master’s ability to project their “feelings, ideas, desires, and values” onto the body of another (Hartman, 1997, p. 21). This enjoyment—this joy in “use”—is both affective (it provides concrete instances of pleasurable “enjoyment” through the bodily suffering of the slave) and conceptual (in that the meanings of very terms of the civil society are formed in and through the abjection of the slave). “The slave,” Hartman states, “is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body” (Hartman, 1997, p. 62). As such, to abolish slavery it is also necessary abolish these specific enjoyments: white liberty, white citizenship, and the white social body.

But if it is through the enjoyment (or restriction) of these conceptual properties that the contemporary prison functions, we then ought to extend Hartman’s analysis of the economy of pleasure in the enjoyment of property under a slave society to enjoyment of social life in a prison society. This is the connection between the descriptive analysis given above with the interpretive claim offered here. Specifically, the social death effected by the prison in the current moment has a three-fold connection back in time and space to its paradigmatic 18th and 19th century form: (1) genealogical (through the authorization of social death as punishment for crime in the 13th Amendment), (2) structural (in the homological relation between slavery and the prison), and (3) conceptual (in that the contemporary terms of liberal freedom, political membership, and individual autonomy are defined in contradistinction to the criminalized other).

In the contemporary period, the figures of the “prisoner,” the “inmate,” the “convict,” or the “felon,” have become relatively unthinkable as political *subjects*, and yet also knowable as *objects* to be “enjoyed,” both indirectly and directly (from the perspective of the enjoying agent). Directly, for example, they are used and enjoyed as objects of cultural consumption (across the political spectrum from *Orange Is the New Black* or *The Wire* to *COPS* or National Geographic’s *Lockdown*) or academic consumption. But more perniciously they are enjoyed indirectly: used as fungible sources of labor (in industries as diverse as customer service, manufacturing, and fire-fighting), as bodies to boost census counts and therefore redistribute political power (through prison-based gerrymandering and felon disenfranchisement), or conceptually giving normative value and descriptive meaning to the categories of “free,” “white,” “male,” or “citizen.”

A “carceral enjoyment,” following Hartman, is the use of “the prisoner,” “the inmate,” “the convict,” or “the felon” as the ground through which “free” feelings, ideas, desires, and values are projected, and take shape. Perhaps it is the case that the enjoyment of the seemingly “free” person in a prison society is *directly* experienced through the watching of suffering itself. In this way, it might directly mirror what Hartman identifies as visceral pleasures experienced by the

slave master when directing the *use* of their property. Yet even in the absence of such overt scenes, the social death of the prison itself and its attendant production of social life is dependent on, parasitic on, and fabricated by said deaths in both abstract and specific material forms of *unfreedom*. As Jared Sexton notes, “social death might be thought of as another name for slavery and an attempt to think about what it comprises, and social life, then, another name for freedom and an attempt to think about what it entails” (Sexton, 2011, p. 17). That is to say, in using the language of “enjoyments” it is possible to distinguish between the “pleasures” one might experience at the level of affect (such as the patriotic pleasure of voting even while also living under the conditions of felon disenfranchisement, or when one consumes media about the prison) which always functions on the level of “joy” or “jouissance,” from the particular affective *attachment* produced by their enjoyment (their use), whether conscious or otherwise.

In the absence of overt scenes of subjection and domination, there remains the deeper epistemological problem: many carceral enjoyments appear as “unknown” to those who are not targeted directly by the criminal punishment system or to those who escape its grasp. Incarceration is often “out of sight” and “out of mind” for many people in the United States. This lack of “knowledge” is not simply a matter of convenience, but more properly operates through an epistemology of ignorance that structures this “not knowing” (Alcoff, 2007; Mills, 1997; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007) or alternately under the epistemological block of “constitutive exclusion,” (Kramer, 2017) supporting a *polity* that is hetero-patriarchal, settler-colonial, and white supremacist but which operates under the “camouflage” of “criminal justice.” As Paula Ioanide explains:

These epistemologies encourage everyone to know how to ignore knowledge, information, and testimonies about the histories of advantage and disadvantage predicated on racial, gender, sexual, national, citizenship, and religious classification. They produce the failure to see how the fates of different people are ultimately linked. The epistemologies of white ignorance produce the failure to experience any ethical upheaval about violence and discrimination—or worse, *the tendency to morally justify these acts*.

(Ioanide, 2015, p. 12, emphasis added)

We are, interestingly, at a moment in which *knowledge* of the criminal punishment system is more widespread than perhaps ever before, and in particular, that it is an instrument of white supremacy and violence. Beyond best-sellers that name mass incarceration as the “New Jim Crow,” we have widely seen documentaries such as *13* and *The House I Live In*, professional athletes (including N.F.L. quarterbacks, U.S. Open Champions, and entire professional basketball teams in the W.N.B.A. and N.B.A.) speak openly about white supremacy and have engaged in wildcat strikes. And (most importantly) we continue to see the largest social movement and mass uprising in at least 50 years lead by queer youth of color, many of whom operate from an expressly police- and

prison-abolitionist perspective. Yet at the same time, even with this increasing dissemination of “knowledge” about mass incarceration, it frequently operates by marking the *dysfunction and failure* of an otherwise “benign” practice of incarceration, focusing on the injustices within the criminal punishment system rather than the injustice of the criminal punishment system, focusing on police violence rather than the violence of policing, and often preempting the deeper analysis of incarceration’s racialized and colonial history.²⁷ In this way, “reform” itself becomes a property of enjoyment, part of the social life of social death produced by the prison.²⁸ In addition to the narrow and broad productions of social life produced by the social death of confinement and criminalization of non-white persons, there is the extensive production of social life produced by the social death of settler-colonial law: reform. Reform can thus be seen as an attempt to ameliorate social death by keeping the host alive, so that the parasite continues to survive.

Abolitionist killjoys

To recap the argument so far as a series of hypotheticals: First, if it is the case that there is a connection between the social death of slavery and the social death of incarceration, then second, we ought to recognize that the social death of incarceration is fundamentally linked to the whiteness of policing (as part of the system of racial capitalism under which we live, and the (re)production of whiteness itself), and third, that wherever there is social death there is a constitutive parasitic social life produced to which we are affectively and epistemologically attached. As such, we arrive at this question: If the social life produced by the social death in the prison is a *property of enjoyment*, producing something like civic and social forms of carceral pleasures or enjoyments, then how can the affective attachments be disrupted such that a reconfiguration—a rebuilding—of the world is possible?

By extending Sara Ahmed’s figuration of the “feminist killjoy,” I argue that we might disrupt carceral enjoyments *and* our attachments to them by directly obstructing them, because this figuration and practice is focused on the affective and epistemological registers of such enjoyments. At a minimum, we must insist on the presence of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons at the “table” as a reconfiguration of social and civic life around those who resist social death. The production of social life attendant to this epistemological block can only be addressed by dramatically changing whose voices are heard, acknowledged, and centered in practices of collective freedom that are anti-carceral and abolitionist. Mere descriptive presence, however, is nevertheless insufficient as well, and an ongoing practice of refusal and critique remains necessary to abolitionist praxis. That is to say: We need more killjoys at the table, and we need to be willing to constantly up-end the table as we continue, shifting reformist attachments to abolitionist ones. This would be, to follow Crawley, to embrace Black social life: “Black social life has been the constant emergence of abolition as the grounding of its existence, the refusal of violence

and violation as a way of life, as quotidian. Black social life ... is an abolitionist politic, it is the ongoing 'no,' a black disbelief in the conditions under which we are told we must endure" (Crawley, 2017, p. 6).

Ahmed introduces the figure of the killjoy by narrating the experience of *becoming* a feminist. As she puts it in her 2010 article "Feminist killjoys (and other willful subjects)," becoming a feminist is also an experience of becoming "the problem" (Ahmed, 2010a).²⁹ 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." This experience of unhappiness, however, is a productive force. Grounded in a phenomenology of feminist and anti-racist consciousness, Ahmed argues that becoming aware of this alienation from what one expects to make one's self happy is a resource for imagining other worlds, other ways of being. Reclaiming this particular form of unhappiness, this disconnection from expected desires, is to claim the identity of 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" (Ahmed, 2010a). The killjoy contrasts with and disrupts the expected affective scripts imposed on persons by virtue of oppressive social and political orders.

The recognition that there *is* a gap between how one might feel and how one "ought" to feel, Ahmed insists, reveals that that another world is possible. As Ahmed puts it succinctly on her own website: "Killing joy is a World Making Project" (Ahmed, n.d.) 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. It is *not* the case that the killjoy is the source of bad feeling, but rather the killjoy "creates" bad feeling by drawing attention to the already existing bad feeling for *some* at the table 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, redirecting it toward others. As Ahmed notes, those who point out racism or sexism are very familiar with this phenomenon: *they* are often accused of being racist or sexist in response. 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. For queers and other others the familiar is revealed to you, because you do not inhabit it. To be 'estranged from' can be what enables a 'consciousness of.' This is why being a killjoy can be a knowledge project, a world-making project" (Ahmed, 2010a).

In this way—working and feeling in the gaps between affective attachments we are "supposed" to have and the bad feeling generated by questioning or rejecting those attachments—the world-making project of being (and becoming) a killjoy is to embrace the worldly (and "sweaty") work of conceptualization. Ahmed argues that feminist ideas are, "What we come up with to

make sense of what persists” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12). The ideas that are generated in this way are what she calls “sweaty concepts”—those that resist full abstraction from a particular material situation and refuse to be seen as something “outside” the world which they seek to describe. Sweaty concepts are those that are “worldly” and which are “also a reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around, a different slant on the same thing. . . . one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13).

Because killjoys, as instances of what Ahmad calls “affect aliens,” feel this conceptual separation through their affective distance from “good feelings,” they are especially suited to disrupt epistemologies of ignorance. By working within the archives of subjugated knowledges and insisting upon their relevance, they can bridge what might otherwise be distinct academic and political projects. Importantly, because epistemologies of ignorance are forms of *willful* not knowing (rather than a traditional ignorance of facts), then 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 ones who point out that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are actual are charged with willfulness; they refuse to allow these realities to be passed over” (Ahmed, 2010a; original emphasis). Being a feminist, she argues, “involves political consciousness of what women are asked to give up for happiness” (Ahmed, 2010a). As Liat Ben-Moshe notes, this is the work of “dis-epistemology”—of “letting go of attachment to certain ways of knowing” (Ben-Moshe, 2020, p. 126).³⁰ By extension, being a prison abolitionist killjoy would involve raising the political consciousness of what 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.

Beyond this specific epistemological disruption, bringing to light the parasitic forms of happiness 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” (Ahmed, 2010a). 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.³¹ Moreover, such theoretical resources have already been theorized and practiced by incarcerated persons themselves.³²

But even without being at its most openly resistant and defiant, the range of options for the political, epistemological, and affective disruption provided by the killjoy is wide. And perhaps most importantly, served merely by the

presence of those who do not belong at “the table” (the metaphor that Ahmed deploys throughout her work). 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” (Ahmed, 2010a). 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 raking up the accusation of being a killjoy and embracing its willfulness, stickiness, and tension?

Conclusion: “Keep it, spread it, or do what you want with it...”

Merely being at the table, however, is not enough. As Ahmed notes, the work of the killjoy is in concert with others, part of a broader project of killing the social life that has been organized around knowledges and enjoyments of the suffering of others. Ahmed calls for a “killjoy movement,” in the company of other killjoys: transfeminist killjoys, ethnic killjoys, crip killjoys, indigenous feminist killjoys (Ahmed, 2017, p. 267). The abolitionist killjoy would join in this coalitional project, and travels under an umbrella of abolitionist politics (predicated on, and without giving up a commitment to, Black politics, queer politics, feminist politics, decolonial politics, etc.).

I suggested at the beginning of this essay that McDonald is a model abolitionist killjoy—someone whose presence and analysis can disrupt the “good feelings” that we have about the prison and prison reform, and who inculcates a productive set of negative affects toward the current state of affairs. McDonald rejects the possibilities of carceral reforms not merely by stating the facts of the matter (that prison cannot be made “safe” for anyone) but she also disrupts the affective attachments we may hold for “progressive” prison reform proposals (such as a “trans prison”).

First, McDonald does the epistemological work of the killjoy, making the implied premise of the question clear: that we believe that there is even such a thing as a “safe” prison environment. And she disrupts that premise by marking it as a *fantasy*: as a unicorn. And she does this by also rejecting the terms of analysis as they have been offered: that safety is a feature of prisons and that protection can be provided through isolation and segregation. Speaking elsewhere, McDonald drives home this epistemological killjoying project, refusing to allow others to continue to live in structured ignorance of the functioning of mass incarceration in the United States, and the role that incarcerated persons have in disrupting that regime of knowledge:

I think it’s time that people know these things, now. Any time that you’re being attacked in your community, and you ask the police to help you and they say no, I think people should know about that ... because somebody’s

going hear about this and they're going to spread the word, and then they're going to spread the word. For me now ... this is my healing process. This is a part of me getting every little thing off my mind and off my chest, and ... let the world know... this is how I was treated, this how my family was treated, this is how my friends was treated, this is how strangers are treated, this is how everyone is treated. ... Literally, I'm almost to the point of where I'm just gonna stop a person on the street and just give them like a ten-minute briefing and just walk off. I don't want nobody, I don't want nothing, just listen to this for five minutes, keep it, spread it, or do what you want with it, and walk off.

(McDonald, 2014b)

McDonald explains how a lack of knowledge about the routine violence visited upon trans* persons is because of a lack of venues where gender non-conforming individuals can (and must) be encountered. Speaking forcefully from this position and experience is necessarily disruptive both to the current state of affairs (“this is how everyone is treated”) and the expectations of “successful” discourse (“do what you want with it”). If a part of the problem we face in understanding the reach and effects of mass incarceration is epistemological—the structured silencing of some voices and a production of non-knowledge—then to have hegemonic understandings of the world disrupted by those for whom mass incarceration and its effects are known all too well is philosophically and politically important.

Second, McDonald engages in a paradigmatically critical account of incarceration that disrupts the reformist fantasies of finding “alternatives” to the prison.³³ She offers a direct refusal of the given terms of analysis and practice that support the current state of affairs, bringing to the foreground a core prison abolitionist claim: the prison cannot be made “safe” for anyone, and in particular, that making it “gender responsive” for women (the fastest growing group of incarcerated persons in the U.S.) and for trans* persons is not the goal. This disruption builds on a wide body of critical literature refusing the language of “safety” and reformist “success” that has driven a prison-building boom under the rubric of “gender responsiveness” (CURB, 2007; Heiner & Tyson, 2017; Lawston & Meiners, 2014; Shaylor, 2008).³⁴ More generally, McDonald obstructs the reformist hopes of “getting the prison right” and calls out those who might seek to reconcile the prison with the prevailing form of multicultural civil and political society. They are already reconciled as such. McDonald refuses both the notion that her own incarceration was justifiable on the basis of her personal “safety” and the more generally held belief that prisons themselves can ever be made anything other than locations that produce social death for the sake of others.

And lastly, she offers a call for solidarity and support for those who continue to live outside the demos and behind bars. Note the *affect* of this call and the response it receives from audience. Lest anyone think that the killjoy is joyless, that the cultivation of bad feelings against the “good” feelings of parasitic social

life is joyless, here is evidence that it is anything but that. It is, in classic critical formulation, the re-evaluation of “good” and “bad” in relation to the sticky objects in the world. It is sweaty concept formation, based in a willful subjectivity. It is this kind of refusal of carceral enjoyment—specifically of the reformist desire to fix the prison for TGNCI folks—which ought to be at the center of anti-carceral theory and practice.

For Ahmed, the account of the feminist killjoy does not imply that all women necessarily disrupt the feelings of patriarchal happiness, but rather, in *becoming* a feminist, a new relation between the “good feelings” of the social life produced by forms of social death becomes possible. In McDonald’s case, her descriptive representation as a formerly incarcerated transwoman of color does necessary disruptive work, but the killjoying comes as well from her abolitionist analysis and embrace of being out of step with reformism. She disrupts the affective and normative scripts of “reintegration” or “re-entry” (which are fully captured by the carceral state). As an abolitionist killjoy, she argues for world-making. She holds open the possibility for other others to join in the movement (through solidarity) to become killjoys as well.

As Joel Olson argues in the closing pages of *The Abolition of White Democracy*, “[N]o privilege held can compare to a world in which privilege does not exist” (Olson, 2004, p. 145). In a similar vein, McDonald argues that there is no form of prison that can ameliorate the suffering of those inside prison better than a world without prisons. And neither is there a form of prison that can soothe the suffering of those who have been victims of violence, harm, and aggression, better than working to create a world without prisons. That prison may seem to soothe now is only because of the carceral enjoyments of the social death of the criminalized other, the suffering of the marginalized other, and the bad faith of parasitic social life. And to build a world without prisons, to attack the conditions of social death that are effected by and through the prison, would be felt as costly to those whose social lives currently depend on the productive labor of the incarcerated worker, the civic labor of the disenfranchised felon, and the moral labor of the “guilty” convict. But to understand those costs as *losses* would be to misunderstand the enjoyment of these privileges, these properties, as deserved rather than the parasitic enjoyments that they are.

Notes

- 1 On the philosophical importance of this tradition to critical prison studies, see Guenther & Taylor (2016).
- 2 I take this wonderful and concise definition of genealogy as the “critical redescription of a domination description” from Ladelle McWhorter (1999, p. 43).
- 3 Moreover, as has been well documented by critical carceral studies scholars, historians of the prison, and especially incarcerated people, a primary “organizational” principle of the prison is sex-assigned-at-birth segregation. This means not only is gender-violence an *essential* characteristic of the practice of incarceration, but also that TGNCI (trans, gender-non-conforming, and intersex) persons are

always “out of compliance” when incarcerated (Kunzel, 2010; Levi & Waldman, 2011; R.K. Robinson, 2011; Spade, 2011; Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2007).

- 4 I take up the idea of Abolition Democracy as a *framework* for critical analysis in Dilts (2019).
- 5 There is a logical order to these claims, yet I also think that they are importantly interdependent, better thought of as abstracted points in a broader constellation of concepts that can work together as a model for how to understand our present through a materialist historical method. By constellation, I am thinking of Adorno’s formulation of the term in which “history is a *constellation* that can really be grasped only with the help of an elaborate philosophical theory, and not by reducing it to individual concepts or pairs of concepts” (Adorno, 2006, p. 87). Adorno describes the constellation as made up of “individual phenomena” that are also illuminated by the constellation of which they are a part:

If what is at stake is a type of thought that does not follow the procedures of identity philosophy and that defines the concepts it employs only by virtue of the *constellation* in which they obtain a specific value, then it follows necessarily that dialectical thinking will not just apply to the phenomenon it scrutinizes but will also point beyond it. Just as the constellation always consists of individual phenomena, so too light can fall on individual phenomena only from the constellation. Moreover, I should like to add that the illuminating force of such models and model concepts is all the greater, the more intensively you immerse yourselves in the details of individual phenomena. ... This suggests that there is a kind of reciprocal interaction between the constellations, on the one hand, and events on the micrological plane, on the other.

(Adorno, 2006, pp. 184–5)

This approach is helpful for abolitionist theorizing because abolitionist praxis reaches dialectically beyond the current capacity of concepts to capture the present moment.

- 6 In particular, see pp. 5–8 of Patterson for his account of how natal alienation functions by cutting off the slave’s birth ties from a past and a future traceable through lineage. Thank you to Lisa Guenther for reminding me of the importance of this important temporal isolation at the heart of social death.
- 7 As Zurn notes in his excellent overview of the *concept* of social death, not only is the term contested in its philosophical and social scientific uses, it is also closely related to other terms such as Lauren Berlant’s idea of “slow death.” Its contestation often hinges on questions of agency (see, for instance Neil Robert’s critique of Patterson) while its fellow travelers draw attention to its open-ended temporality. In both cases, what is often revealed by following these lines of analysis, and which Zurn notes succinctly, is that the concept of “death” itself is less definitive and precise than typically assumed (Berlant, 2007; Roberts, 2015; Zurn, 2020). See also Stanley (2011; 2013).
- 8 I use the terms “civic death” and “civil death” interchangeably in this essay.
- 9 See also pp. 38–45 of Patterson (1982) for his account of these two conceptions of social death.
- 10 See also Eduardo Mendieta’s formulation: “The ethnoracial prison, as extension of the ghetto, continues this form of natal alienation and social death through its policies of cultural, social, and political exclusion” (Mendieta, 2004, p. 54).
- 11 See also Heiner (2003).
- 12 I argue that these stronger approaches are genealogical in their method (Dilts, 2017).

- 13 It is important to not conflate *attempts* to render someone as social dead with one being rendered socially dead. As Ashon Crawley brilliantly reminds us, both the quotidian and extraordinary violence of white supremacy is often driven by the failure to have “successfully” reduced someone to a position of social death. Reflecting on the white supremacist murder of members of EAME Church, Crawley writes,

White supremacy, its rapacious and incessant antiblackness, is the constant emergence of fear, the fear of being engulfed, and changed, by this radical abundance. Dylan Roof murdering the members of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, illustrates the ways his was not the violence of someone who believed that social death—the state of total powerlessness—was achievable but was the violence of one terrified by its impossibility.

(Crawley, 2017, pp. 22–3)

- 14 This is a simplification of the roots of the liberal tradition and its influence on U.S. political ideology, but one that I have taken up in more complexity elsewhere, with specific reference to the influential role of John Locke on American political development and the philosophies and jurisprudence of punishment. See, in particular, chapters 4 and 5 of Dilts (2014).
- 15 Cacho draws on Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 28). See also Ladelle McWhorter’s work for a Foucauldian account of how the distinction between those who may live and those who must die is drawn through the appearance of modern racism (McWhorter, 2009).
- 16 On this parenthetical point see Joel Olson’s gloss on the specific role police forces played in assimilating migrants into whiteness as a political system, drawing on the historical work of Noel Ignatiev, Henry Allen, and David Roediger (Olson, 2004, p. 45).
- 17 The particular colonial structure of race, capitalism, and accumulation likewise goes deeper (Nichols, 2020; Park, 2016).
- 18 See, in particular, Haley (2016). For an overview of scholarship making explicit connections between race and *gender* under theories of racial capitalism, see also Sweeney (2020).
- 19 As scholar and activist Erica Meiners has noted, it important to emphasize the violence *of* policing, rather than reify the idea implied by the more typical turn of phrase, “police violence,” that there is a mode of policing which is ever not violent in a meaningful sense.
- 20 This is, arguably, another way of invoking the careful historical work done by scholars such as Naomi Murakawa and Elizabeth Hinton, who show that the U.S. prison buildup was constructed over a nearly 50-year project of liberal governance from Kennedy and Johnson right through to Clinton and Obama (Hinton, 2015; Murakawa, 2014). From a longer historical perspective, this is also to note that early modern liberal thought (Locke, most paradigmatically) is grounded on racializing, gendering, and normalizing assumptions of subjectivity and punitive practices that make this historical contingency materially “sticky.”
- 21 I take this sub-heading from Ioanide (2015).
- 22 Brown argues that a danger in work on social death is that Patterson’s account of it has become little more than a concept or abstraction, ignoring how Patterson’s own work actually resists such a reduction.

- 23 I explore this aporia between life and death under the terms of incarceration in Dilts (2015).
- 24 These two forms are neither exhaustive, nor even necessarily distinct, as it is possible (if not common) for forms of resistant social life to also be parasitic on the social death of others. Thank you to Sarah Tyson for reminding me of the importance of this point. Additionally, the economic metaphor of “purchase” here is not meant to imply that social life is in fact a scarce or finite resource, but rather that it is treated as such under the logic of parasitism.
- 25 Resistant social life may, of course, also operate under various forms of “cover” (Cohen, 2004; Kelley, 1994; Scott, 1992).
- 26 I am indebted to the work of Elisabeth Anker in helping me formulate these questions (Anker, 2020).
- 27 As Robert Nichols (2014) has noted, many anti-prison scholars foreground accounts of mass incarceration under such rubrics, reifying the notion of “acceptable” levels of incarceration. Doing so suppresses Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism that identify the legal system itself as dominating and oppressive. This might be read as an instance of what Kristie Dotson (2011) categorizes as “epistemic silencing.”
- 28 As readers of Foucault will no doubt recognize, this is not a new relationship between the prison and its reform (Foucault, 1995, p. 265).
- 29 Ahmed gives an extended account of this figure (and its specific relations to “happiness” in Ahmed (2010b) She returns to the figure extensively (and offers a “killjoy manifesto”) in Ahmed (2017). Portions of my own account of the abolitionist killjoy appear in an abbreviated form in Dilts (forthcoming).
- 30 Ben-Moshe describes this dis-epistemological work of abolition to be the same kind of work done by Ahmed’s killjoy figure (Ben-Moshe, 2020, p. 128).
- 31 I take the term “creaturely” from Guenther (2016).
- 32 See Banu Bargu’s *Starve and Immolate* for analysis of how hunger strikes and organized death fasts by prisoners in Turkey can be conceptualized as a politics of human weapons. 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 (Ashker et al., 2014; Bargu, 2014).
- 33 On the basic problem of the notion of “alternatives” see (Conrad, 2012; Davis, 2003; Foucault, 2000, 2009).
- 34 On the importance of rethinking the category of “safety” itself from a radical perspective with an emphasis of community accountability, see Tyson (2014).

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