Editors' Introduction

An image of a captive African American killed by his keepers — "The Negro convict, More, showered to death" — in nineteenth-century New York appears on the cover of this special issue of *Radical History Review*. According to the text accompanying the image, the state of New York incarcerated More at Auburn for unspecified crimes. Unnamed sources inside the prison accused him of sharpening a knife and muttering something under his breath, infractions for which he was to be punished by immersion in the so-called shower-bath. Like the penitentiary itself, progressive penal reform had produced the shower-bath: humanitarian legislators considered the whip too brutal, too cruel, for employment by their civilized state. Terrified by the threat of this punishment, More escaped Auburn. He was recaptured, beaten, and on return to the prison, guards put him in the shower-bath, where they dumped some three to five barrels of water on him. Guards returned More to his cell; five minutes later, he was dead.

New York prison reformers seem to have used More's death to rally support for their cause. They demanded the prison do justice to their vision of a proper and efficient state. In this sense, it is important to consider that this image, dated 1858, was produced on the eve of a civil war that promised, but incompletely delivered, blacks' emancipation from slavery in the United States. More was not killed by the slave masters decried among the growing supporters of the free-labor North. Rather, in this so-called free state, More died at the hands of prison keepers, men who believed that their institutions were the avatars of democratic modernity and the envy of the Atlantic world.

The fact that such state-sanctioned brutality continued within the most enlightened political systems is one that remains with us today. In the early twenty-first century, political leaders in the United Kingdom and the United States express their predictable and familiar horror of death. But they marshal and stand behind

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mechanisms of violence and death in their geopolitical strategies. Abroad, our armies use violence, torture, and punishment in an attempt to incapacitate their enemies. In the United States, we even wage war against our own citizens: civil death exists for more than a quarter of black males whose convictions prevent them from voting.[1] And physical death breaks into public spaces: from Amadou Diallo's New York in 1999 to the London Tube and the Miami airport in 2005, police officers and air marshals revealed that their zero tolerance of "suspicious activity" brings an overwhelming response: death from multiple gunshots for young men of the African and Latin American diasporas.

This issue of *Radical History Review* urges a consideration of the history of punishment in light of the forces and practices of death, for the descendants and inheritors of the world that slavery and colonialism created. The issue builds on Orlando Patterson's classic and controversial analysis of slavery as a form of social death.[2] In the modern modes of state punishment (militarized control of space, forced labor extraction, racial formation, moral indignation, and, for the incarcerated, proximity to biological death), we see a historical genealogy connected to other spatialized forms of physical domination including slave plantations, colonial missions, indigenous reservations, Bantustans, and concentration camps. All were sites on which massive killing took place, or at least more subtle, though hardly less painful, sites at which colonial powers used death as punishment against those who opposed them.

Moderns and liberals believe that the bureaucracy behind the rule of law resorts to violence only under exceptional circumstances. In this vision the state protects citizens not just from general harm but also from its own power. But the durable connection between punishment and death illuminates how state power blurs the line between legal and extralegal violence; between what the theorist Giorgio Agamben has identified as the rule of the "normative" state of law and the "prerogative" state of unregulated sovereign power.[3] But such state power is never total and is contested in numerous ways. Thus activist scholarship must uncover the strategies of those able to resist punishment and death. At times it produces unnerving examples: journalists reporting on Guantánamo Bay detainees have written about a massive wave of hunger strikes. Prison authorities resort to forced feeding to keep their captives alive.[4] An unnamed detainee reportedly told his lawyer, Julie Tarver of the Center for Constitutional Rights, that "now after four years in captivity, life and death are the same."[5] In the United States, harsh sentencing regimes have created a large population of prisoners with no chance of parole. In these situations, even noncapital punishment eventually leads to death.

Prisoners use their minds as well as their bodies in a struggle against incarceration and have sometimes used education — one of the pillars of so-called rehabilitation — as a tool against domination. Alan Eladio Gómez's contribution about the reeducation of federal inmates in Marion Penitentiary in the 1960s and 1970s

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and Heather Jane McCarty's reflections on teaching history classes in San Quentin today suggest that rehabilitative education provokes thorny questions of political scholarship in different historical moments. Within prisons that create fields of social, civic, and political death, how might education open the possibilities for life? Under what circumstances does a prison education *absorb* the possibilities for dissent, and under what conditions can radical dissent erupt from its containment? To what extent is radical movement possible from behind prison walls? These contributors suggest that prisons can indeed become places where radical education flourishes.

Education in prison might offer the possibility of a return to life. But purportedly kindly correction — as activists, historians, social scientists, and others critical of penal reforms have argued for more than a century — has remained an ideology employed by liberal and not-so-liberal states to craft legitimacy for their politicians and for particular forms of punishment. In actual practice, states have always fallen short of crafting humane institutions within which prison inmates experience confinement. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, the belief in progressive penal reform — that criminals could be rehabilitated through work and education — did not put an end to capital laws and the practice of state killing. In many self-consciously modern and reformist countries, and especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, the retributive nature of the death penalty coexisted with the penitentiary, an institution supposedly dedicated to reforming criminals of all stripes. In effect, punishment and death stride together hand in hand across the landscape of modernity. Death — or the continued threat of it — has been a more constant ally of punishment than humanitarianism, under avowedly correctional regimes and openly punitive ones alike.

Punishment brings all those associated with it into what anthropologist Michael Taussig identified as the space of death.[6] The enforced proximity to death for criminals and deviants (however defined) or for the incarcerated must be understood as foundational to the exercise of power, the structuring of social difference, and of the ways that states, civil society institutions, and individuals mobilize life-crushing violence (structural, economic, and bloody) and life-giving resources (structural, economic, and health-infusing) to enforce the social order. Prisons concentrate violence in society; they do not diminish it.[7]

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A half century after the American Civil War, in the wake of the First World War's industrially enhanced carnage and political repression, American critic Randolph Bourne came to understand that "war is the health of the state."[8] We extend Bourne's insight to suggest that in the modern world, the *health of the state is predicated on the death or deathlike incapacitation of its enemies*, foreign and domestic, through the paired practices of warfare and punishment. Civic cohesion among citizens is

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forged in the crucible of hatred for criminals — those who reject the state from within — as well as among those foreign states whose armies threaten the state from without.

The liberal-bourgeois democracies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries folded the logic of execution into a somewhat softer version, much as New York's reformers had hoped in the case of the convict More. Only under exceptional circumstances, citizens were told, would liberal states actually kill their criminals, preferring to correct them and bring them back into the company of the well-behaved, productive citizenry. These states ostensibly rejected the cruel treatment of those who threatened good order, offering prisoners penance — the root of the word *penitentiary* — and a chance at a reformed and a redeemed life, rather than having to endure a brutal death. More's killing, however, spoke directly to the deadly effects of this ostensibly democratized power for the unrepentant or for people of color. Even the name of the device that killed him — the shower-bath — mocks the notion of hygiene and correction that penitentiaries, rather than execution, seemed to promise.

Modern societies, whose punitive power resides in the administration of life through penal institutions rather than in spectacular executions, choose to let death, and the threat of death, linger for incarcerated populations. The strategy shrouds its targets in silence. All too often, punishment brings death because it attempts to render its targets voiceless. Even admirers of penal reform in the early United States observed how penitentiaries sustained a deathlike state, characterized by their love of silence as a strategy of punishment. In their report on U.S. penitentiaries for the French National Assembly in the second decade of the nineteenth century, Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville observed that "when the day is finished, and the prisoners have retired to their cells, the silence within these vast walls, which contain so many prisoners, is that of death. We have often trod during night those monotonous and dumb galleries, where a lamp is burning: we felt as if we traversed catacombs; there were a thousand living beings, and yet it was a desert solitude."[9]

The silence of prisons can be shattered by exposing how the relationship between punishment and death — understood as an integral component in histories of slavery, colonialism, and postcolonial worlds — demands attention to the persistence, meaning, and function of violent death across economies and polities, continents and oceans. The histories of racism must be understood as central in this formulation.[10] Indeed, as postcolonial critic Achille Mbembe has forcefully argued, "the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state," a state which, in turn, attempts to reproduce the political order and guarantee processes of capital accumulation.[11] Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slavery and settler colonialism in particular shaped the key categories of racial personhood against which white, rights-bearing citizens in the Atlan-

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tic world were defined. In turn this process enabled a dialectical structuring of labor relations and provided the formative rationales for exploitation and the practices of inflicting suffering, which made death proximate for subject populations.

In addition to its economic and social functions within the realm of punishment, death and killing have often been used to further specific political ends. While actual and deliberate tortures are all too common in contemporary and historical prisons, life in even the most humane and bloodless institutions is best seen as a form of low-intensity torture and collective violence against subject populations. Torture, as Elaine Scarry has argued, brings death with it.[12] Torture destroys the meaning-making capacity of the tortured and attempts to replace it with the meanings of the torturer.[13] Torture, then, is one method of committing attempted murder without exacting the toll of death. Among tortures, sexual violence is all to familiar to incarcerated women in contemporary and historical prisons, just as sexual violence was central to what historian Nell Irvin Painter identified as the "soul murdering" capacity of the United States' patriarchal chattel slavery. As authors in this issue make clear, sexual violence against men and women has been a common element in colonial counterinsurgency and domestic penal systems.[14]

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Contributors to this issue of *Radical History Review* focus on these and other matters in the ongoing project to document and write a history of punishment and death. Dylan Rodríguez's article, for example, on the indignation with which most Americans responded to revelations of American military torture at Abu Ghraib, sheds light on the inability—or unwillingness—of many of the same critics to take note of similar tortures against people of color at home. Rodríguez identifies not just torture but the prison itself as a principal institution of war in American history. Indeed, Rodríguez argues that seemingly unregulated and unapproved state violence is both historically consistent and entirely functional to American empire at home and abroad. Kelvin Santiago-Valles brings a longer sweep of Western colonialism into view, arguing that the processes of primitive accumulation in the Spanish Atlantic world were founded on a coterie of coercive/penal labor relations in the transition between slavery and the meager emancipation that followed. These were bloody legislations that garnered profits for the empire, as well as racial distinctions for the condemned. Like Rodríguez, Santiago-Valles demonstrates how disciplinary processes operate against both colonial and domestic subject populations and how race proves to be the hinge that allows this unequal distribution of suffering to exist in postemancipation societies.

Though Patterson's conception of slavery and social death provides a powerful analytic and serves as the point of departure, authors in this issue stress the question: dead to whom? Indeed, in the memories of friends, family members, and social movements, the dead, whom the state attempts to silence, continue to speak. In sto-

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ries and oppositional practices, the dead become martyrs, and their presence haunts the oft-tormented dreams of those who inflicted violent death. Their dismembered bodies can become more powerful than they had been when they were alive.[15] The condemned sometimes even use their silence as a platform for action and continue to speak to the living from beyond the grave; one is reminded of Industrial Workers of the World organizer Joe Hill's gallows injunction *not to mourn, but to organize*.

In an article featuring interviews with prison activists, Alan Eladio Gómez explores the insistence of life among those who confronted what they called a "living death" in Marion Penitentiary's Control Unit. Designed for managing inmate political activists of the twentieth century through a combination of pharmaceutical and martial control with structured leniency, American prison officials designed Marion to crush its inmates' political lives.[16] Yet the prisoners at Marion insisted on creating life for themselves through analysis and political struggle. By withholding their labor, rioting, destroying state property, and appropriating the radical possibilities of prison education at different moments, they sought the best possible means not just for survival but for personal, collective, and social transformation.

In recent years, antiprison activists have insisted that racially based mass incarceration is a form of violence, just as activists in the environmental justice movement have insisted that toxins in the air and water are a structural violence that unequally distributes death along racial and class lines. Rose Braz and Craig Gilmore, organizers with Critical Resistance and the California Prison Moratorium Project, reflect on the lessons antiprison activists can (and have) learned from the environmental justice movement in California, making links among diverse and unexpected allies in the movement to stop the massive prison-building boom of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The historian Heather Jane McCarty also reflects on the richness of her experience as a teacher in California's San Quentin prison while seeing prison education as a miner's canary, assessing the winds of change from a correctional to a punitive model of imprisonment in recent years. Even prison education — a demonstrably effective tool of inmate reformation — has come under attack as being too lenient in the context of late modernity.

In their respective contributions, Helena Cobban and Carolyn Strange tackle broad and important issues in the history of incarceration. With an eye toward recovering an example of colonial extermination with relevance to the present, Cobban presents an extended reflection on Carolyn Elkins's *Imperial Reckoning*, a Pulitzer Prize–winning history which painstakingly uncovers the brutal counterinsurgency against the Mau Mau in the waning years of Britain's African empire. Cobban offers insight into how ideologically weak but militarily powerful empires use terrible violence to sustain their rule, one that is both brittle and unstable, but no less horrific for its victims. Even in the midst of penal reform movements in England and critiques of the Nazi regime and Soviet gulag, British troops abroad engaged in mass incarceration and extermination. Carolyn Strange's review of recent literature

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on punishment, pain, and death challenges scholars — particularly scholars of U.S. history — to look beyond their own borders and tendencies toward exceptionalism for broader understandings of the international dimensions of punishment. Strange identifies key issues for future research in the infliction of suffering through punishment and the worlds it creates, sustains, and destroys.

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The contributors to this issue suggest a need to conceptualize punishment and state power as productive rather than reflective of social and economic relations, a production based on the physical and symbolic destruction of racial, sexual, or political minorities. They build on Taussig's insight that "the space of death is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes. We may think of the space of death as a threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction."[17] In the midst of expansions of carceral practices in late modernity and the global war on terror, analysis of the space of death illuminates the materiality of state power — and might yet suggest the means by which the living may contest it.

— Ethan Blue and Patrick Timmons

Notes

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1. Sasha Abramsky, *Hard Time Blues* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), xiii.
2. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
3. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
4. See BBC News, Americas, "UN Concern at Guantánamo Feeding," www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4569626.stm (accessed January 20, 2006).
5. See Democracy Now, "Headlines for October 20, 2005," www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/10/20/1410254 (accessed January 20, 2006).
6. Michael Taussig, "Culture of Terror — Space of Death: Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 467–97.
7. David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

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8. Randolph S. Bourne, "The State," in *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915–1919*, ed. Carl Resek (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1964), 71.
9. Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France*, trans. Francis Lieber (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 65.
10. Much of this was illuminated in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's commentary on the panel "Racism, Ethnicity, and Capital, II" at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, New Orleans, March 5–9, 2003. See also Frank Wilderson, III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9 (2003): 234.
11. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 17.
12. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
13. Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
14. Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project, *All Too Familiar: Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. State Prisons* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996); Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Full Loaded Cost Accounting," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 125–46.
15. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Lyman L. Johnson, ed., *Death, Dismemberment, and Memory: Body Politics in Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).
16. In the 1990s, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons replaced Marion with the Federal Supermax facility in Florence, Colorado. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Richard A. Serrano described Marion's successor as a place where "inmates are reportedly not merely punished, but incapacitated and broken down." See Richard A. Serrano, "The Slow Rot at Supermax," *Los Angeles Times*, www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-supermax5may05,0,1798602.story?coll=la-home-headlines (accessed May 8, 2006).
17. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4, quoted in Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and Black Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 4.

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