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“Nobody gets out alive. This place just a big coffin”:  
On Death and Dying in American Prisons

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**Abstract**

This article explores the manner in which the narratives in the *Prison Noir* volume (2014) edited by Joyce Carol Oates bring into view the limits and abusive practices of the American criminal justice system within the confines of one of its most secretive sites, the prison. Taking an insider’s perspective – all stories are written by award-winning former or current prisoners – the volume creates room for the usually silent voices of those incarcerated in correctional facilities throughout the United States. The article engages the effects of “prisonization” and the subsequent mortification of inmates by focusing on images of death and dying in American prisons, whether understood as a ‘social death,’ the isolation from any meaningful intercourse with society, as a ‘civil death,’ the stripping away of citizenship rights and legal protections, or as the physical termination of life as a result of illness, murder, suicide or state-sponsored execution.

**Keywords:** prison literature, death, mortification, solitary confinement, rape, suicide, murder, social death, civil death.

It’s a devastating concept for most people to grasp,  
but the sound of that cold, iron cell door  
shutting behind you each and every night  
is gut-wrenching, like the finality of a coffin lid being closed.  
(Palmer 231)

While having only five percent of the world’s inhabitants, the United States holds close to twenty-five percent of its prison population, with more than two million people behind bars in local jails, state and federal prisons (Hoke). Mass incarceration is an unassailable fact of

contemporary American society, and “correctional supervision” (Gopnik) is not an isolated, marginal phenomenon, but rather an institution central to American culture. A recent article by *The Baltimore Sun* shows that the number of US citizens serving life sentences has more than quadrupled over the last three decades (Knezevich), and, according to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), the number of deaths by suicide in state prisons has also risen by some 30 percent. Some call it “Lockuptown” – the “city of the confined and the controlled” (Gopnik), others identify it as a “deeply entrenched carceral state” which is “long on degradation and short on mercy” (James Whitman qtd. in Gottschalk 16). Either way, prison culture is so pervasive in the United States that it “extends far beyond prison walls, through the walls of entertainment, politics, economics, and into the walls of our collective living rooms” (Middlebrook 819).

Starting from the recent volume of short stories *Prison Noir* (2014), my essay examines the manner in which prison literature documents the dehumanizing power of detention in American correctional facilities and how the carceral space causes the mortification of prisoners. Stripped of their human vitality and meaningful social interaction, entombed by means of protracted isolation and solitary confinement, defiled by their felonious backgrounds and defaced by state-condoned abusive practices, convicts lead suspended existences. They are the “civilly dead” of contemporary times, waiting to be rehabilitated. In order to illustrate this carceral “poetics of living death” (Smith, “Detention Without Subjects” 243), my essay focuses on images of death and dying in US prisons, thus putting forth a broader critique of the American criminal justice system and its actors.

Prison literature only emerged as an important area of academic study towards the end of the previous century. It aims to voice criticisms of the criminal justice system, on the one hand, but also of the society which fosters and enforces it, on the other. It has been argued that this often proves a difficult task, especially when criticism is directed at the criminal justice system and its actors from *inside* the prison walls, from subjects already discredited and bound to raise the readers’ skepticism. In his introduction to *Prison Writing in Twentieth-Century America* (1998),

H. Bruce Franklin also notices a certain unease regarding the reception of the literary works of current or former inmates. He claims that the public is not supposed to be aware of and concerned with the amount of abuse and the response to punishment by prisoners, and, as a result, "there has always been a contradiction between the prison and whatever is able to reach out from within its walls to those outside" (2). Nevertheless, both academic and public interest in prison literature have been gaining momentum in contemporary United States, not least due to the numerous writing programs in correctional facilities throughout the country.

By dramatizing a "landscape created by policy makers and reimaged by writers" (Miller 195), prison literature also becomes vital for the deeper understanding of the place of law in literature. Quentin Miller argues that the vision of the incarcerated is pivotal to any law-in-literature approach, as the law means more than an intellectual abstraction to them, and they embody the very consequences of its enforcement (190). Robin West, a Professor of Law at Duke University, argues that "imaginative literature . . . tells us something that law itself cannot and that other forms of legal scholarship likewise do not, about the meanings of law in the lives of its subjects, its agents, and its adjudicators," as well as "in the lives of those that law willfully ignores, subjugates, marginalizes or excludes" (4-5). In this sense, prison literature facilitates the reading public's firsthand exposure to the realities of social "others" and to the impact the justice system has on their lives. Consequently, it helps to illuminate "what happens when the law removes certain offenders from the living circle of rights-bearing humanity" (Smith, "American Undead" 154) and in this way guarantees an ethical commitment to document, react to, and withstand the everyday challenges and brutality of carceral life.

The authors of the stories in the *Prison Noir* volume, edited by the renowned Joyce Carol Oates, are both women and men, most of them university graduates, novelists, short-story, and poetry writers, some of them winners of the annual PEN Prison Writing Contest and other writing awards. All the authors have been enrolled in writing programs in their respective correctional facilities, and the fifteen stories featured in the volume were chosen from approximately one hundred solicited

submissions. Several are still serving time in American prisons, others have been released since the volume came out in print, and one of the male authors has since been executed by the state of Florida. Their narratives can be read as cries for help against the background of “the retributive turn in U.S. penal policy” (Gottschalk 2) and contemporary “tough-on-crime” policies whose systematic implementation has led to the current system of mass incarceration. As professor of criminology and Pulitzer Prize recipient Elliott Currie observed, prison “has become a looming presence in our society to an extent unparalleled in our history or that of any other industrial democracy” and with the exception of “major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social program of our time” (qtd. in Davis 11). The volume delves into the stages and results of what has been deemed the process of “prisonization” (Clemmer 315), into the psychological effects of long-term solitary confinement, the incidence of mental illness and suicide, and the consequences of the endemic sexual abuse in American prisons. Arguably the one pervasive trope which looms large over the entire collection is that of death and dying, whether understood as a ‘social death,’ the isolation from any meaningful intercourse with the society meant to generate vitality, as a ‘civil death,’ the stripping away of citizenship rights and of the legal protections entailed, or as the physical termination of life as a result of illness, murder, suicide or state-sponsored execution.

Images of mortification have been closely associated with the carceral environment ever since the rise of the penitentiary in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of Michel Foucault’s confidence that once “the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was avoided; the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment,” then the “age of sobriety in punishment had begun” (14), prolonged institutional isolation as punishment for crime would soon meet its fair share of criticism. Stephen Allen, inspector at New York’s Auburn Prison, one of the first two model penitentiaries in the United States, believed that it imposed a kind of virtual death on the convicts: “what are the natural and political rights of a criminal convicted of rape, highway robbery, burglary, sodomy, maiming, forging public securities, &c. the

punishment of which is death by the laws of England; and in this state, imprisonment for life? Are they not dead in law, and consequently without rights, natural or political?" (qtd. in Smith, "American Undead" 149-150). Similarly, Charles Dickens's observations upon his visit at the Eastern State Penitentiary in 1841 abound in images of ritual entombment, spiritual torture and decay afflicting the inmates in solitary confinement:

Over the head and face of every prisoner who comes into this melancholy house, a black hood is drawn; and in this dark shroud, an emblem of the curtain dropped between him and the living world, he is led to the cell from which he never again comes forth, until his whole term of imprisonment has expired. He never hears of wife and children; home or friends; the life or death of any single creature. He sees the prison-officers, but with that exception he never looks upon a human countenance, or hears a human voice. He is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the meantime dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair. (241-42)

Furthermore, decades after Dickens noted the gradual mental deterioration of inmates triggered by protracted solitary confinement, which was believed to allow prisoners time for reflection and penance, the United States Supreme Court found in *re Medley* (1890) that the practice engendered results inimical to rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society of the convict. The Justices argued that the "caging" of inmates transformed the survivors into automatons, numb and frozen in life as a consequence of debilitating mental impairment:

A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community. (*Find Law*)

This "captivity that strips away rights and mortifies subjectivity" (Smith, "Detention without Subjects" 244) represents the *basis* of American incarceration, not its exception. Perhaps contrary to public perception, the "felon rendered dead in law is no anachronism," no relic of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century legal fiction, but "a continuing effect of dehumanizing practices of punishment" (Dayan xii). Colin Dayan argues that although a

living being, the prisoner is “not only dead but buried by the law” and that the inmate is but a physical presence with “no personhood,” lacking “the social and civic components of personal identity” (57).

According to Erving Goffman (1961), prisons are “total institutions” whose “encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire. . .” (4). In there, a “small supervisory staff” closely administers a “large managed group,” and the relationship between the two groups is one based on “narrow hostile stereotypes,” restricted mobility, and formally prescribed social distance (Goffman 7). Upon entrance in such a total institution, the inmate undergoes what Goffman identifies as a process of “mortification”: in the immediate absence of the support offered by the predictable social arrangements in the free world, the prisoner “begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified” (14). An integral part of this process of mortification is the inmate’s “role dispossession” (certain roles are lost to inmates as a consequence of their separation from society) which seals his/ her “civil death,” as they “may face not only a temporary loss of the rights to will money and write checks, to contest divorce or adoption proceedings, and to vote but may have some of these rights permanently abrogated” (Goffman 16). For instance, as a consequence of contemporary U.S. disenfranchisement laws, fourteen states bar voting for life even to ex-offenders who have *fully* served their sentences and approximately 3.9 million American citizens are disenfranchised (Dayan 60). Moreover, as Michelle Alexander observes in her recent seminal work on mass incarceration in the United States, former prisoners become permanent second-class citizens. She goes on to show how this is particularly true when it comes to African-American outlaws:

Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination – employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service – are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. (2)

Ritualized mortification comes early in the carceral environment, as the very admission procedures allow for the newly arrived to be "shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations" (Goffman 16). This is similar to what Donald Clemmer identifies as the process of "prisonization," which entails the prisoner's change of status into "an anonymous figure in a subordinate group" controlled by all-powerful authority figures (315). For example, the narrator in "Trap," one of the stories in the *Prison Noir* collection, moves through the stages of admission from the moment his name is replaced by a random number on a wristband, to bathing and squatting for thorough cavity check-up, to already being called obscene names and humiliated by officers, all activities "whose symbolic implications are incompatible with his conception of self" (Goffman 23). Thereafter he is given clothes and shoes which, again symbolically, are the wrong sizes but also impossible to exchange, and is assigned to quarters (Boyd 69-72).

Once incarcerated, the prisoners are constantly exposed to realities which gnaw at their sense of self. The walls that individuals erect between their beings and the environment are brought down in prison, where "territories of the self are violated" systematically (Goffman 23). An extreme form of such "contaminative exposure" (Goffman 28) is sexual molestation. According to US Congress, sexual abuse is endemic throughout the American incarceration system (Singer x) although punishable under the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 (PREA). Despite regulation and contrary to Decazes's dictum that "the law must follow the convicted man into the prison where it has sent him" (qtd. in Foucault 248), prison rape is both part and parcel of the carceral reality and a quintessential item of American popular culture, often doled out as entertainment (Singer xii) as it "stretches from urban neighborhoods and rural communities, to schools and megaplex theatres, to television and books and newspaper articles, to the rich and poor, to the old and young, to jails and prison, and even to the halls of the highest levels of state and federal government" (Smyth 2). Some of the narratives in the *Prison Noir* volume engage the topic of how the more youthful, naïve or vulnerable

inmates often become victims of the so-called prison “buzzards” – older prisoners preying on the young in exchange for protection against stabbings, robberies or even gang-rapes. The narrator in “Angel Eyes,” a veteran inmate who has seemingly made it his mission to protect other incarcerated fellows, muses that “[e]very day they come in younger and younger” and that “[p]retty soon they’ll be babies, and I’ll end up having a work detail changing diapers” (White 201). He reminisces about one prisoner who made a strong impression due to his “clean, forever young” complexion, and an innocence “begging you to corrupt, to violate him,” to “take it for yourself or ruin it for others if you couldn’t have his youth and ‘thusiasm, good looks and ‘telligent features” (White 201). The older prisoner managed to warn the latter against Gorilla Black, who was “a bona fide predator, all head and shoulders black as motor oil, ugly ‘nuff to deserve the name Tracey to soften his ‘timidating ‘ppearance, a stocky fella, built like a Sherman tank” and “nasty as a rattler and hung as a palomino” (White 206), and whose predatory behavior was tolerated within the facility.

Oftentimes the conditions of imprisonment are so dire and their effects on the incarcerated so intense that the latter contemplate or resort to self-harm and even suicide. In his essay “On Anger,” the Roman stoic Seneca urged that “Do you see your own throat, your own neck, your own heart? there are so many ways of escape from slavery. Are these modes which I point out too laborious, and needing much strength and courage? do you ask what path leads to liberty? I answer, any vein in your body” (38). The protagonist of the rather lyrical “There Will Be Seeds for Next Year” similarly contemplates oblivion to life in prison as the ultimate form of slavery, but lives to tell the tale: “I didn’t do it for attention. I really *did* want to die. I didn’t want to return to my life sentence and curious expressions from everyone else in the unit” (Caligiuri 133, emphasis in the original). His confession provides insight into the agony and resilience in the face of dying by one’s own hand and is fraught with guilt, regret and longing:

I don’t remember much past preparation. Standing over the sink. The razor. The first cut and the dig, the saw, the tangle of wires just under the skin, the mush of my wrist. The pink aura and the cool over my face. The

other wrist, trying to gnaw just as deep, not deep enough. I remember the pain, fright that made me want to go back to before – so great as to want someone to come and undo this. My hands convulsed as though detached from me. The red mineral spouting from me might as well have been from the center of the earth. Smudges of red on my cheek – I looked at the mirror to see if it said I was ready. Instead I saw someone I would probably never see again, a face being erased, with a name and a story that didn't matter anymore. It was a mess, the last mess I would ever make of myself. I chased images of my life. My mom and dad, the alleyways in Minneapolis, from shooting basketballs to bullets. A hug from my best friend Sonny with tubes connected everywhere in her body. But the images ran from me, the backs of their heads retreating. I wanted to know why, but I couldn't get their attention. (Caligiuri 133)

Clyde is unrecognizable to his fellow inmates, and even to himself, subsequent to his suicide attempt – "I came back to familiar faces that didn't know me anymore. I was a different person with bandages on my wrists and a softened face that scared *me* enough to turn my mirror backward" (Caligiuri 133). He soon learns that he may have come back from the dead, but was as good as dead for his family outside the prison walls as "[m]y mom told me she was tired of explaining to people that her son was in prison. Now she tells people she doesn't have a son" (Caligiuri 145).

In another story, ironically entitled "Milk and Tea," the female narrator witnessed several suicide attempts, both failed and successful, during her time in Women's Huron Valley. Each time death occurred within the facility, she wished her time had come and envied the departed for their release:

Her feet must have been only two feet from the ground as her body dangled like a rag doll from the door hinge. There was chaos: screams, officers running, hands shaking, fellow inmates praying, everyone watching with morbid curiosity as her limp body crashed on the cement floor, cracking her skull. Not that it mattered; she was already dead. Damn! I was jealous. (Marquardt 187)

In fact, the ubiquity and inevitability of death in this so-called 'Death Valley' facility is what allays the mental suffering and alienation as "[t]here is no comforting, consoling, or human contact allowed. You learn that all souls in prison are damaged and there is not one person you

can trust, even yourself. There is nothing normal about hell except death” (Marquardt 190). This is illustrative for the so-called “social death” of prisoners, the way in which their loss of social vitality in the absence of any meaningful relationships and human interactions leads to a “loss of identity and consequently a serious loss of meaning for one’s existence” (Card 63).

In the narrative in “Milk and Tea,” death is furthermore assimilated to an infectious disease which spreads and lingers over the correctional facility like a plague, a curse or a “dark prophecy . . . that hasn’t yet been fulfilled” as

[i]t’s not just inmates hanging themselves; seemingly healthy officers are hauled away in ambulances, never to return. One was pronounced dead from a brain aneurysm. Strangely, no one noticed her car parked in the middle of the lot, wrecked by a crash she was involved in on the way to the prison. It was as if she needed to arrive here before the fog of death in this valley sucked out the last of her breath. Visitors drop dead in the visiting room without explanation. . . . Death surrounds this place, and I crave it like iced tea on a summer day. (Marquardt 188)

Convinced that “[d]eath brought me here, and death could set me free” (Marquardt 188), the narrator devises a plan to help her get the long-awaited peace. Feeling trapped in her cell, with flashbacks of the abusive relationship which ultimately brought her to Death Valley, she will end the misery of incarceration by any means.

Some of the more emotionally potent stories in the volume engage the consequences of solitary confinement in American correctional institutions. An extreme form of imprisonment due to its crippling isolation and alienation, solitary confinement constitutes the norm when it comes to inmates on death row and has been deemed by a recent Report by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) “a kind of death before dying” (*A Death Before Dying* 4). According to the same Report, prison psychiatrists have been raising the alarm that “[i]t’s a standard psychiatric concept, if you put people in isolation, they will go insane. . . . Most people in isolation will fall apart” (7). Calling for reform of the criminal justice system, President Barack Obama identified solitary confinement as “an affront to our common humanity,” while others criticized this

'American gulag' as "the place they dump the trash they most want to be forgotten" (Penn). The United States incarcerates in isolation units the largest number of prisoners in the world, and this extreme form of confinement can last for years or decades on end (Knowles 900), in spite of its debilitating and dehumanizing outcomes. Falling entirely within the discretion of prison administration and bearing no relation to the inmates' original conviction (Knowles), placement in solitary confinement has been linked to an increase in suicidal or otherwise violent thoughts, alienation, chronic depression, and other, more severe, forms of mental illness, as well as serious physiological disturbances. As it has been argued, "we seem to have reproduced some of the worst aspects of an earlier époque's snake pit mental asylums in the isolation units of our modern prisons" (Kupers qtd. in Knowles 908).

Of his over two decades of imprisonment, the main character in "Shuffle" has spent more than half in solitary confinement, reminiscing over his only son's suicide and over his own history of paternal sexual abuse. Left to himself and seemingly stuck in time, with "tiny amounts seeping by at a snail's pace" (Stephen 36), Al "feels himself stumbling toward a blackened pit – a pit of despair and darkness," free-falling into "what seems to be a hole with no bottom" (39). Al's bottomless misery is deepened when he finds himself forced to share his isolating cell with another inmate, because of overcrowding, and he laments the good old days when segregated truly meant solitary confinement. He notices bitterly that "[a]s the prisons filled to overflowing and budgets tightened, the feds needed to get the most bang for their bucks" even if it meant "cramming two grown men into a space designed for one" (Stephen 27). For Al, nothing seemed worse than being "stuck in a cement box twenty-three hours a day with a jackass he couldn't stand" as he "knew from experience that after a few weeks, every cough, every snuffle, every smacking of the lips . . . was like a direct malicious assault on his peace" (Stephen 27). After repeated, sometimes violent, pleas to the guards, the prison psychologist and even the warden for his cellmate to be removed, Al finally seems to understand that he will be forced to share the already too tight space with the newcomer and might as well play along. Simultaneously, the reader can finally corroborate all the evidence

scattered through the narrative from the beginning: namely, that Al's companion is but a figment of his imagination, arguably a result of severe mental illness triggered by his isolation.

In similar fashion, Edward Silverfox, the narrator in "Foxhole," bemoans the dehumanizing treatment of inmates in solitary housing units, arguing that "prison is the place where a man's dignity goes to die" (Dolarman 129). A long-term resident of a "seemingly ancient, tower-guarded complex," an apparent throwback replica of Dracula's castle (116), Silverfox mulls over the pervasive powerlessness of the confined arguing that if one

wanted to recreate it, to feel what it might be like, you could move into your broom closet and give the key to the guy who was the biggest bully at your school. Have him feed you only cheap, starchy, flavorless food. Only take a shit in full view of strangers. Never mind. There's no way to recreate it. You can't. You would never be able to fully account for all of the factors that make it miserable. (130)

Classified as a maximum-security inmate, Silverfox "lived in an underground prison with no natural light," entombed "in a dark cell for most of the day" (Dolarman 131) where he learned that "[i]solation is a creeping kind of torture" and that he "would probably rather die" than suffer it any longer (131). What is more, from his cell he could hear the inmates on the death row block singing in preparation for an execution "the most mournful sound my ears have ever heard," which added to the psychological torment of anticipation: "I felt I was being squeezed ever tighter and tighter and that before long I would cease to breathe. . . . Someday, they'll be singing for me" (Dolarman 131-32).

In one other narrative, "A Message in the Breath of Allah," a resident of Coldwater Correctional Facility in Michigan, a place where "you're sent . . . to die or assist the dying," has been praying to be released for twenty-four years when he finally understands that he needs to send messengers to carry his prayers *directly* to Allah. Consequently, he starts killing inmates who are either sick or dying after priming them with respect to the message they are supposed to take to Allah. In order to achieve the desired outcome, he makes sure that his victims' final expressions are not the contorted looks of individuals who, in truth,

opposed suffocation to death, but the smiling, pleasant countenances of someone who departed gracefully and peacefully, for "I was taught that you returned to Allah with a smile on your face, because you're about to meet your Lord" and a "pained expression shows a lack of faith" (Sareini 84). Having noticed a prisoner playing basketball "with a strange smile on his face the whole time" as he carried a mouth guard to protect his teeth from injury, the forced grin gave him the idea of how to send his messengers to Allah with smiles on their faces:

I placed the mouth guard between Twin's lips and elevated his legs to force blood toward his face. The pooling blood would give him color and a peaceful-looking sleep for his journey. Nothing says peace like rosy cheeks. After several minutes, I slowly settled his legs down, loosened the blankets, removed the mouth guard, and turned off the television. (Sareini 92)

The many deaths among the incarcerated he came to be guilty of failed to raise any suspicions as "[t]he whole facility is geared toward making sure that prisoners die in the least costly and most efficient way" (Sareini 82). On the contrary, he unintentionally became "an asset to the prison system," as "the state never asks questions when you save it money. It costs five times as much to keep a sick or dying prisoner than a healthy one. When costs go *up*, questions are asked" (Sareini 95).

This heavily staged and rosy-cheeked version of dying in prison, orchestrated by a psychopathic mastermind, stands in sharp contrast to the violent, unnatural deaths which nonetheless become familiar to the inmates after decades of confinement. One of the convicts in the story "The Investigation," for instance, finds it problematic to recount all the killings witnessed over the years behind bars and "stopped at around thirty, depressed by the memories and by his difficulty recalling some of them," wondering what this said about him, "that he could watch a man be killed and then not be able to remember it? Where did that memory go?" (Van Poyck 247). Cotton further ruminates over the fact that although television had made it seem easy to kill a man – "you stick a man once and he silently drops like a sack of cornmeal" –, in reality the will to survive and "the vitality of the human body could amaze you":

The primal urge to live, to survive, is powerful, and it takes a lot to overcome that – more than some are willing to give. And when they do die, it is messy, often with bloody reluctance, with thrashing, gasping, begging, imploring, praying, with victims calling to their mothers. Yes, a man will generally fight hard to live, harder than one might think possible. (Van Poyck 248)

In another narrative, “Immigrant Song,” the rather naïve Celso is similarly surprised by how habituated people in prison are with the death of their fellow inmates, by suicide or murder, so much so that it hardly stirs any emotion or reaction: “Back home, death was an event. It was a small town; when somebody died, if you weren’t grieving them, you were comforting someone who was. Up here, death was routine. Maybe, because there was so much of it, people were numb to it” (Verdoni 164). Resorting to an analogy which is recurrent in this volume of prison narratives, Clyde likens inmates to animals waiting to be sacrificed in slaughterhouses, further illustrating the prisoners’ lack of control over their lives and the worthlessness of their existences: “This is what the turkeys at work must have felt like. They were unloaded off trucks and hung by their legs on a conveyor belt. His boss showed him where an electric spinning blade slit their throats. The turkeys coasted by in an endless waterfall of blood” (Verdoni 164).

A voice speaking from the other side of the divide is given the floor in the story “3 Block from Hell,” where one of the *guards* is a self-proclaimed killer – “[n]ot just any serial killer, but the best one” – who has murdered 198 prisoners and “each one of them deserved it” (Palmer 229). Claiming to be doing the public a great service considering the high recidivism rate, Bo Carr believes that the American criminal justice system is broken when the “public is saddled with the taxes” and the prisoners “lie on their lazy asses and watch TV for twenty years” (Palmer 229). Besides saving the state money and providing some comfort to the victims’ families, Carr also admits to a morbid fascination with and an intense satisfaction derived from “seeing the face of a prisoner after he has hanged himself. It’s almost like *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, where Veruca Salt turns blue and blows up like a balloon. It’s the same effect: their faces get all puffy, eyes bulging out of their sockets, blood leaking from where tears once flowed, and they turn a wonderful blue

color. . . . It's better than someone who simply slits their wrists" (Palmer 233). Carr seems to be an avid supporter of the death penalty as well, who blames bleeding-heart liberals for advocating milder forms of punishment or execution for convicts, such as "put[ting] them to sleep like we're living inside some fairy tale," as opposed to better and more efficient times in the past when "we killed by electrocution, hanging, beheading, and even caning" (Palmer 240). Guard-turned-serial-killer rationalizes his deeds by claiming to be doing it in place of the broken criminal justice system, plagued by an increasing prison population, economic collapse, corrupt prison staff and police officers, and its mission distorted by the transformation of correctional facilities into big businesses.

Not unexpectedly for such dark places of inhumanity and spiritual torture, some of the fictional carceral spaces in the *Prison Noir* volume are haunted by shadows or ghosts. Inhabiting the fringes of life and death, the spectral figures parallel and allude to the prisoners' suspended existences at the threshold between the "living death" of incarceration and the symbolic rebirth of rehabilitation. Avery Gordon has noted that haunting is "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" and that the shadowy creatures come into existence "when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view" (xvi). For instance, Stillwater correctional facility, that "walled-in fortress of buildings sitting on the Minnesota side of the St. Croix River" seems replete with "all the souls that have gotten trapped here after they died"; the pondersome narrator of "There Will Be Seeds for Next Year" further notes that "for almost a hundred years it has been a depository for souls trapped under the wheel" (Caligiuri 135). There barely is any difference between the former inmates who have seemingly returned to haunt the place of their detention and the current living inhabitants of the facility, rendered ghost-like by their inability to make their voices heard, as "[f]rom all of our unanswered echoes, sometimes it feels like we are already ghosts, or on our way to becoming." Even though alive, the prisoners in the facility are invisible "others" who are virtually non-existent to the world outside: "Every once in a while there are people here from the historical society,

taking pictures of the old Georgian colonial-style buildings, whose limestone has been decaying for decades. They don't visit to take pictures of *us*" (Caligiuri 135, emphasis in the original).

With its debilitating high temperatures during the summer and filled with souls both living and dead, Stillwater appears as a proverbial hell on earth. Because of the scorching heat, "[e]nd-of-the-world hysteria was going full tilt" and "the whole joint had gone apocalypse crazy." Inmates failed to get comfort and would move around like delirious zombies who "walked the tiers and their lips moved, but they weren't speaking to anyone we could see" and who "had stories, names of individual souls that visited them on their tiers and in their dreams. People swore the spirit of a kid who killed himself ten years before was living in one of the showers" (Caligiuri 142). Climactically, the riots started as a reaction against the dire conditions of imprisonment lead to the prison bursting up in flames and coming down in ruin, in what the narrator interprets as an act of symbolic liberation and retribution for each soul confined and persecuted behind its walls:

Black smoke and orange flames rose into the sky. Brick and sandstone that was once so secure, collapsed, and was welcomed with applause. Let them try to save it. The water from the trucks and the hydrants attempted to stop it, but it had already burned what it was supposed to. I felt the fire – not its heat, but its history. I was looking at that miserable old building that had taken so much more than it would ever give back. It burned for every soul this place ever held captive, every dream broken, every chopped tree. There was fire for every year it consumed, every emasculating word, every memo, every untreated illness, for every blood-red cent stolen and absorbed, every family member who passed away. . . . I swear I could see the faces of all those trapped souls escaping. (Caligiuri 152)

The fall of the correctional facility at the end of the narrative seems to reach beyond the destruction of a particular building housing prisoners and symbolically hint at the decline of the prison institution itself as the ultimate form of punishment for crime, as the fire "told us that for all the things we knew this place to be, even the oldest of institutions can burn, break down into ash" (Caligiuri 153).

It has been argued that "[b]eing unable to tell your story is a living death" (Solnit). There are, indeed, instances when staying silent is staying

powerless and invisible. (The academic study of) prison literature aims to capitalize on the strength of first-hand accounts of prison life and redress this issue, among others, by casting a bright light upon works by former or current inmates in correctional facilities the world over. For prisoners, as for any writer, the act of writing is both personal and public, both a form of self-representation and a means of social intervention (Rymhs 81). Their narratives not only disclose the extent to which imprisonment affects the lives of the imprisoned, but also make a case against "the omnipotence of penal power" in the United States (Cheliotis xx). As "the darkest region in the apparatus of justice" (Foucault 256), the prison is usually associated with extreme regulation and excessive control, abusive practices, the physical and mental decline and decay of both prisoners and correctional officers, which nonetheless occur behind the walls of well-guarded institutions and barely reach the outside public.

Steeped in the everyday reality of their authors formerly or currently incarcerated throughout the United States, the fifteen creative works in the *Prison Noir* volume bring to the forefront the unmediated experience of people living beyond the pale of law-abiding, respectable society in a perpetual state of living death due to crippling isolation, especially in high-security units and facilities, lack of meaningful interaction with peers and family members, and humiliations which can lead to the untimely dissolution of the self. As my analysis has tried to demonstrate, images of death and dying are pervasive both in American correctional facilities and in their fictional representations, such as those in the narratives under scrutiny here. Entombed by solitary confinement, rendered dead in life by the discretionary humiliating practices within prisons across the US, stripped of their civil rights and suspended on the threshold of meaningful existence, inmates are constantly subject to mortification through prisonization. It is prison literature's role to allow for insight into "one of the most exclusionary, secretive and impenetrable sites in modern society" (Pratt 23) and thus to make visible the unmediated impact of that "special American punitiveness" (Clear and Frost 5) which led to the flooded prison system under constant scrutiny and criticism in the present-day US.

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