

UNMAKING AND REMAKING THE WORLD IN LONG-TERM SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

LISA GUENTHER
Queen's University

On September 1, 2015, a landmark settlement was reached in *Ashker v. Brown*, a class action lawsuit brought by long-term prisoners in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) of Pelican Bay State Prison in California. The plaintiffs charged that conditions of extreme isolation in the SHU violated the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment, and that the lack of a meaningful review process for placement in the SHU violated their right to due process (Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity 2015).¹ Each of the plaintiffs had been isolated for ten or more years in an eight by ten foot windowless cell for twenty-two and a half to twenty-four hours a day. Time spent outside of the cell was limited to an empty outdoor exercise yard with twenty foot high concrete walls and no windows. Plaintiffs were not permitted contact visits with family, friends, or attorneys, and the only phone calls permitted were "bereavement calls" when a family member passed away.

At the time of the settlement, California housed approximately three thousand prisoners in solitary confinement: a fraction of the roughly eighty thousand prisoners in extreme isolation across the United States. Among these, more than one thousand California prisoners were isolated indefinitely as a result of policies for the management of "security threat groups" or prison gangs (Solitary Watch 2012). The criteria for labeling someone as a gang member were so loose, and so difficult to contest, that the Chair of California's Public Safety Committee observed that if the policy were applied to them, "many of us sitting on this committee would be [considered] gang associates, I don't know how it's possible to avoid association under this system" (Shourd 2014).² Even so, not everyone is equally subject to gang validation. Black and Latino prisoners are still disproportionately labeled as gang members and associates, not just at Pelican Bay but across California and the US (Schlanger 2013). Until the recent settlement, the only way out of the Pelican Bay SHU for a validated gang member or associate was to "debrief" by providing current information about prison gang activity and/or promising to collect information on an ongoing basis. In effect, this policy weaponized prisoner's voices against each other, both as snitches and as informants, to reinforce the prison administration's control

¹ Also see Center for Constitutional Rights's summary of the lawsuit and settlement at <https://ccrjustice.org/home/what-we-do/our-cases/ashker-v-brown>.

² To facilitate this process, a step-down program is being implemented with more opportunities for contact with other people, including small group recreation, phone calls, and employment.

over a situation that they arguably created by failing to provide adequate protection for incarcerated people of color since the 1950s (Reiter 2012; Skarbek 2012).

The settlement agreement in *Ashker v. Brown* abolishes the practice of indefinite solitary confinement for validated gang members in California, bringing most long-term SHU prisoners back into the general prison population.³ Gang validation and minor rule infractions will no longer be sufficient reasons to put someone in isolation, and the housing situation of every prisoner in the SHU will be individually reviewed within a year. The terms of this settlement were reached after two years of periodic hunger strikes by prisoners at Pelican Bay and across California, supported by a network of activists and lawyers outside the prison. The prisoners who organized the strike, known as the PBSP-SHU Short Corridor Collective, describe themselves as “a multi-racial, multi-regional Human Rights Movement to challenge torture in the Pelican Bay SHU” (Guillen 2013). They organized two hunger strikes in 2011, and after a period of slow, modest reform, they launched a third hunger strike in 2013, with over thirty thousand prisoners in California participating on the first day (Carroll 2013). The strike action was suspended two months later in response to a commitment by California lawmakers to hold hearings on solitary confinement. Meanwhile, prisoners continued to work with lawyers at the Center for Constitutional Rights on *Ashker v. Brown*, eventually winning their landmark settlement. As a result of years of legal and political action organized from within the extreme isolation of the Pelican Bay SHU, members of the Short Corridor Collective have finally been able to sit around a table and speak to one another face-to-face.

What happens to the prisoner’s world when they are confined for over a decade in a windowless concrete box? What sort of world not only tolerates such radical confinement, but also normalizes, justifies, and defends it as a condition for public safety and efficient prison management? How have some prisoners managed to create and sustain a sense of shared Being-in-the-world and Being-with Others, even without the experience of shared space? And what would it take to restructure the world, such that the cruel and unusual practice of solitary confinement is “settled” once and for all?

This paper analyzes the SHU as a form of weaponized architecture for the torture of prisoners and the unmaking of the world. I will argue that through collective resistance, prisoners in the Pelican Bay Short Corridor have re-purposed this weaponized architecture as a tool for remaking the world by creating new, resistant, and resurgent forms of social life. This collective practice of remaking the world used the self-destructive tactic of a hunger strike to weaponize their bodies and their lives against the

³ In *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (2006), Dylan Rodriguez draws on the research of Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison to show how incarcerated activists build a “collective cognitive praxis,” both as a tool for political organizing and as an epistemic practice of collective sense-making (109). For Eyerman and Jamison, “[a] social movement is not one organization or one particular special interest group. It is more like a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by a dynamic interaction between different groups and organizations ... It is precisely in the creation, articulation, formulation of new thoughts and ideas—new knowledge—that a social movement defines itself in society” (quoted in Rodriguez 2006, 105). Rodriguez situates this account of epistemic activism in relation to “radical prison praxis,” understood as “the embodied theoretical practices that emerge from imprisoned liberationists’ sustained and historical confrontations with, insurrection against, and dis- or rearticulations of the regimes of (legitimated and illicit) state violence inscribed and signified by the regime of the prison” (107). For an account of epistemic activism in a North Carolina jail, see Medina and Whitt, *Epistemic Activism and the Politics of Credibility* (forthcoming).

weaponized architecture of solitary confinement. But it also developed less spectacular, everyday practices of communication, self-expression, and community-building within a system that is designed to suppress these practices. By collectively refusing food, and by articulating the meaning and motivation of this refusal in articles, interviews, artwork, and legal documents, prisoners at Pelican Bay reclaimed and expanded their perceptual, cognitive, and expressive capacities for world-making, even in a space of systematic torture.⁴

I. THE SHU AS WEAPONIZED ARCHITECTURE

By “weaponized architecture,” I mean a way of designing space to inflict, perpetuate, or normalize violence. The term was coined by Léopold Lambert, a French architect and social theorist for whom “architecture is never innocent” (2012, 49). By creating a material separation between inside and outside, architecture establishes a specific site for social practices of inclusion and exclusion, property and dispossession, protection and exposure.⁵ Both the gated community and the prison are forms of weaponized architecture; their primary difference lies in the power relations that lock people in or lock them out. Depending on one’s social and geographical position, the same building can appear as a weapon or a tool, as a site of illegitimate violence or a legitimate defense against violence.

This is especially true of the SHU. The prototype of the Pelican Bay SHU was a Control Unit established at Marion Penitentiary in the early 1970s as a tool of prison management (or a weapon of counter-insurgency, depending on your perspective) to control federal prisoners who were thought to be “disruptive of institutional authority, or who held radical political views” (Eisenman 2009). Over the past four decades, the exceptional space of the control unit has been normalized, to the point where entire facilities operate as control prisons, and almost every prison, jail, detention center, and alternative school now has some kind of lockdown unit. Prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU have described their isolation as a form of torture that scrambles their senses, fragments their memory, and interrupts their most basic sense of identity. “It’s like time broke,” says one prisoner in the Pelican Bay SHU (Haney 2015, 64). “You live the same life over and over” (69). “I don’t remember what my house looked like, what my sister looks like” (64). Jack Henry Abbott spent almost his entire adult life in prison, including 15 years in solitary confinement. He wrote:

⁴ Doors, windows, and passageways both open and restrict points of access, lines of visibility, and vectors of mobility. Walled enclosures function as fortresses to defend their inhabitants against potential intruders, or as cages to contain and immobilize their captives. See Weizman, *Hollow Land* (2007) for a brilliant analysis of the spatial politics of walls in Israel-Palestine

⁵ As Elaine Scarry puts it, “the torturer uses the prisoner’s aliveness to crush the things that he lives for” (1985, 38). “Each source of strength and delight, each means of moving out into the world or moving the world in to oneself, becomes a means of turning the body back in on itself, forcing the body to feed on the body” (48).

My body communicates with the cell. We exchange temperatures and air currents, smells and leavings on the floor and walls. I try to keep it clean, to wash away my evidence, for the first year or so, then let it go at that. [. . .] If you are in that cell for weeks that add up to months, you do not ignore all this and live “with it”; you enter it and become a part of it. (1991, 46, 29)

In these and other testimonies, the solitary confinement cell functions not as a room that shelters and supports the capacities of an embodied subject, but as an anti-room that structurally undermines these capacities to break the prisoner down.

For Elaine Scarry, this is precisely the structure of torture, understood as a “vehicle of self-betrayal,” in which the prisoner is recruited as “the agent of his own annihilation” (1985, 47). The most insidious aspect of torture is not physical violence inflicted by a hostile other; after all, the identification of a specific antagonist can strengthen one’s capacity to survive and resist. But when violence gets under your skin—when it feels like your own embodied consciousness has been weaponized against you—then torture becomes an attack not just on the individual, but on the relational structure of personhood. It is only as a social being that one can suffer from isolation, only as a sentient creature that one can feel the pain of sensory deprivation, and only as an intelligent being that one can experience a loss of meaning.⁶ Torture exploits the vulnerability that is necessarily entailed in an openness to others and to the world, by virtue of which we do not exist as isolated, detachable subjects but as what Martin Heidegger calls *Dasein* or Being-in-the-world.⁷ And given that the world is not just the totality of objects on planet Earth, but rather a web of relationships whose meaning is grounded in praxis and in Being-with Others, torture is, in Scarry’s words, an “unmaking of the world” through the conversion of artifacts or tools that ought to support the structure of personhood, into weapons that incapacitate and undermine that structure (21).

The room is primary among these tools. For Scarry, a room is both “a magnification of the body” and a “miniaturization of the world” (1985, 38). It provides a stable location for meaningful thought and action—a place to stand, a roof over one’s head—as well as windows and doors to facilitate an exchange with others and with the open horizons of a shared world.⁸ But when deployed as a site of torture, the

⁶ For a more developed account of the relevance of phenomenological concepts such as Being-in-the-world for a critique of solitary confinement, see Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives* (2013) and Guenther, “Political Action at the End of the World: Hannah Arendt and the California Prison Hunger Strikes” (2015).

⁷ For Scarry, everyday domestic objects “express the most expansive potential of the human being, his ability to project himself out of his private, isolating needs into a concrete, objectified, and therefore sharable world” (1985, 41).

⁸ For an example of taking responsibility for artifacts such as the SHU, see Raphael Sperry’s work with Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (2014). Scarry’s analysis of objects is unfortunately limited by her emphasis on the artifact (and hence the artisan as an individual maker), rather than systems and processes. A critical genealogy of the prison wall, not just as an artifact but as a material component of the Prison Industrial Complex, demands an account that traces the production of world-destroying artifacts like the SHU cell to the systems that (re)produce them and the people who profit from them. Nevertheless, Scarry does acknowledge that the “making of an artifact is a social act, for the object (whether an art work or instead an object of everyday use) is intended as something that will both enter into and elicit human responsiveness” (1985, 175). In an expanded version of this paper, I would like to develop an analysis of the prison wall as actant or lieutenant (Latour, “Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer,” 1988) and as the practico-inert dimension of praxis (see Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*, 2004 and Guenther, “Critical Phenomenology,” forthcoming).

room is “converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone” (41). This is the structure of weaponized architecture: a room that no longer supports the perceptual, cognitive, and expressive capacities of the inhabitant as a relational Being-in-the-world, but rather exploits this relationality and threatens to break its articulated structure. Even without the additional violence of physical assault by another person, the SHU already functions as a site of torture in precisely this sense. But it also obscures its own violence through rhetorical strategies that present the “security housing unit” as a standard tool for prison management and public safety. The rhetoric of security, protection, and individual accountability displaces the responsibility for torture from persons to things, as if it were “the wall that executes,” rather than a revisable social order or political system (1985, 45). The walls of a prison cell are designed, built, and managed by specific historical actors in a way that produces both intended and unintended effects; walls can only “execute” in the context of embodied social practices that produce, empower, and sometimes alter their sedimented materiality.

For Scarry, a crucial part of the work of remaking the world that is unmade through torture is “to deprive the external world of the privilege of being inanimate—in other words, its privilege of being irresponsible to its sentient inhabitants on the basis that it is itself nonsentient” (1985, 285).⁹ What would it take to interpret the windowless walls of the SHU cell as sentient and animate? What feelings do these walls amplify, absorb, and reproduce? How do they act out the logic of the Prison Industrial Complex by acting upon the sentience of the prisoner? What relationships of responsibility might they reveal if the walls could speak, and if we had ears to listen?

II. WEAPON/TOOL

The ambivalence of weapon and tool is key for understanding both the structure of weaponized architecture and the possibility of (re)making the world and (re)building networks of responsibility. For Scarry, the same object can function as a weapon or a tool, depending on the surface upon which it acts and how it affects this surface (1985, 173). A weapon acts directly on a sentient surface to cause harm, and a tool acts directly on a nonsentient surface to create an artifact, which in turn acts indirectly on the sentience of another. Scarry describes the process whereby weapons are repurposed as tools as follows:

Rather than using a weapon on someone’s eyes, the world is rebuilt or re-presented (even if only modestly altered) in such a way that it must be reseen. That is, rather than directly altering sentience (as occurs in the use of a weapon on a living body), the tool alters sentience by providing “objects” of sentience. It alters without hurting (often even bringing about the diminution of hurt). Through tools and acts of making, human beings become implicated in each other’s sentience. (175-176)

⁹ See Cacho, *Social Death* (2012) on criminalization as a material, social, and perceptual practice of differentiating between protected and unprotected lives.

This analysis of weapon and tool rests on Scarry's account of the internal structure of the artifact as "the structure of a perception" (289). While the artifact itself is not capable of perceiving, its structure or design articulates in concrete, material form the relation between intentional act and intentional object—or between singular, invisible processes of consciousness and visible objects in a shareable world—which defines the phenomenological structure of perception. In other words, the artifact manifests and materializes the intentionality of a sentient being (say, the architect or designer) who shapes the walls in a certain way, for certain reasons, both in order to express a certain vision of the world, and also to call forth a similar vision in others. As such, the artifact both produces and reproduces meaning through an engagement with materiality and a specific "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2004, 12).

This analysis is useful for tracing both the violence of the SHU and responsibility for this violence, from the seemingly "innocent" or irresponsible walls of the cell to the perceptual practices that racialize and criminalize socially vulnerable populations as "Security Threat Groups," whose isolation and incapacitation is justified or even necessitated by a perceived risk to public safety.¹⁰ The logic of these perceptual practices is biopolitical: it mobilizes racism to differentiate between "those who must live" and "those who may die"—those who can count on the law to protect them, and those who are disproportionately exposed to legal forms of state violence, structural violence, and interpersonal violence.¹¹ The windowless walls of the SHU give objective or material form to these collective practices of biopolitical perception, and they also perpetuate these practices by acting indirectly on the public's capacity for sentience. The logic goes something like this: If someone is isolated in a cell that is designed to incapacitate "Security Threat Groups," then they must belong to a group that threatens the security of innocent people, i.e., everyone who is not in the SHU. Otherwise, how could such practices be justifiable in a putatively democratic society? The public perception of confinement and isolation as indispensable tools for public safety and individual accountability makes it difficult to perceive the way this tool is deployed as a weapon for torture and racial injustice. The weaponized language of Security Threat Groups, intensified by the windowless walls and media blackouts that literally block the public's view of people in prison, conjure and circulate images of monstrosity that foreclose the public perception of prisoners as complex persons who—like anyone else—are capable of both violence and suffering.¹²

However, given the ambivalence of weapon and tool, and given the role of perceptual practices in making, unmaking, and remaking the world, the room that has been weaponized to incapacitate its inhabitants can also be repurposed as a tool for resistance, empowerment, and transformation. In his essay, "Walls Turned Sideways are Bridges," radical geographer Rashad Shabazz writes:

¹⁰ See Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (2003); McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (2009); and Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014) on the racist structure of biopower.

¹¹ See Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France* (2004) on monstrosity as a juridical and psychiatric construct.

¹² Lambert defines resistive architecture as "the ensemble of architectural apparatuses defined by either their legal status or their physicality as a resistance to the normative establishment" (2012, 35).

Prisoners are architects. They [may] lack the ability to physically transform the world around them. Nevertheless, prisoners alter the space of prison. They do this through transcending the bars and repurposing prison space ... These spaces do what the hands cannot. They change the geography of the prison and at times [they transport] prisoners out of the spaces that hold them.
(2014, 582)

Shabazz explores writing as a transformative practice that repurposes the weaponized architecture of the prison and creates tools for building community and solidarity behind, across, and beyond the prison walls. We could call this a practice of “resistive architecture,” following Lambert’s call for architectural practices of repurposing weaponized architecture as a tool for survival, resistance and collective liberation.¹³ In the following section, I show how prisoners at Pelican Bay have managed to create resistive architecture through everyday conversation, writing, and political organizing. Among these practices of resistance were the hunger strikes through which prisoners arguably weaponized their own bodies against the weaponized architecture of the SHU. But, as I will suggest, the strike was just one among many tactics for re-tooling the space of extreme isolation and creating new possibilities for Being-in-the-world and Being-with Others. These transformative practices—creative and destructive, singular and collective, written and embodied in practice—are the work of critical phenomenology (Guenther 2013; Guenther forthcoming).

III. REMAKING THE WORLD

In 2003, seven prisoners were moved to a part of the Pelican Bay SHU called the Short Corridor. Each of these prisoners were labeled by the prison as a Security Threat Group member, and some were thought to be leaders of rival gangs such as the Black Guerrilla Family, Aryan Brotherhood, Mexican Mafia, and Nuestra Familia. Among these prisoners were the men who eventually formed the core leadership team of the Pelican Bay SHU Short Corridor Collective, organizing mass hunger strikes in 2011 and 2013. Throughout the multi-year strike action, prisoner-activists such as Sitawa Jamaa, Todd Ashker, Mutope Duguma, and Antonio Guillen wrote insightful analyses of the situation in the SHU for the Bay View Black Newspaper, the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Network website, and other media outlets.

It may seem impossible, both practically and theoretically, for a group of prisoners in extreme isolation to engage in such broad and effective political action. How did they manage to get up in the morning, let alone organize the largest hunger strike in state history? How did they communicate across the material barriers of concrete walls and steel doors, and across the social barriers of state-sponsored racism and rival gang affiliation? In what follows, I will argue that while the Pelican Bay SHU is a form of weaponized architecture, explicitly designed to undermine the prisoner’s capacity for resistance and collective action, prisoners in the Short Corridor managed to repurpose this weapon as a tool for creating new

¹³ As Prisoner O said to Craig Haney, “I was taught to endure. So I do. But coping is not the same as not being affected or changed” (Haney 2015, 68).

forms of social life beyond the logic of social death. This is not to imply that the SHU is any less violent or harmful because some people have managed to avoid being utterly destroyed by it.¹⁴ Rather, it is to affirm the complexity of social death and its afterlives, both within and beyond the structures that (re)produce them.¹⁵

In an article for the Bay View National Black Newspaper, prisoner-activist Antonio Guillen argues that the intended purpose of extreme isolation in the SHU is to “create an environment that discourages a man’s ability and/or desire to socialize with other human beings” (Guillen 2013). In effect, Guillen names the SHU as a space of torture that undermines the prisoner’s capacity for social relations. He explains how prisoners in the Short Corridor learned to reshape this world-destroying isolation and to co-create a shared world, beginning with everyday conversation. Even in a concrete box, locked behind steel doors, unable to see each other’s faces, and divided by racial oppositions and, in some cases, gang rivalries, prisoners in the SHU found a way to communicate with each other, and to begin the difficult work of (re)making a shared world. They used weak points in the architecture of the SHU—the ventilation system, cracks under doors, even toilet drains—to repurpose the technology of social death and build new forms of social life. They even used existing gang networks and communication strategies to distribute the call to end hostilities and to coordinate hunger strikes across different institutions (Wallace-Wells 2014). After all, if you can run a successful gang operation behind bars, you can also run a successful political campaign. This, too, is an example of repurposing the weaponized sociality of the gang as a tool for collective empowerment.

For Guillen, “the sharing and debating of thoughts and ideas,” and the act of “offering moral support in times of personal loss or tragedy” are “the things that make human beings, human beings” (2013).¹⁶ This sharing of words, ideas, and feelings helped to support the emergence of a specifically political self-understanding as a prisoner class. In an interview with *Democracy Now*, prisoner-activist Todd Ashker explains how people in the Short Corridor began to recognize their common interests and to identify both a specific political agenda of their own and a connection to broader human rights struggles:

¹⁴ See Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives* (2013) for a more sustained analysis of social death and its afterlives, and Guenther, “Political Action at the End of the World: Hannah Arendt and the California Prison Hunger Strikes” (2015) for a different account of the unmaking and remaking of the world at Pelican Bay, drawing on Heidegger’s account of world and Arendt’s account of political action.

¹⁵ In Craig Haney’s 2015 interviews with prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU, Prisoner E reflects on the importance of a social context for a meaningful intellectual life: “[T]hey say the mind is a terrible thing to waste. I think a mind is a terrible thing to have alone. You just have your thoughts in your head, to go over and over, and the repetition is deadening. The things we read in books, the ideas we learn, we can’t use them” (78).

¹⁶ See also hunger striker Jose Villarreal’s open letter from the Pelican Bay SHU, on the importance of class consciousness for hunger strikers: “Marx once said when differentiating himself with Feuerbach: ‘The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively.’ Just like Marx, I see our current actions in this prison strike as ‘sensuous activity.’ Our actions are revolutionary acts that are much more important than may be perceived by the state just as Feuerbach or others would have perceived our acts” (2013; italics added).

[W]e believe it's ... a powerful symbol of the wisdom and strength similarly situated people can achieve in the face of seemingly impossible odds when they collectively unite to fight for the common good of all . . . This common experience together, with the group of us being housed together in adjacent cells, wherein we engaged in dialogue about our common experience, legal challenges, politics and the worsening conditions, enabled us to put aside any disputes we may have harbored against each other and unite as a collective group—a prisoner class—with the common goal of using nonviolent, peaceful means to force meaningful, long-overdue prison reform to happen now. (2013)¹⁷

Ashker's response testifies to the power of words and deeds for creating a sense of collective self-understanding, even in a space of extreme isolation. The language of a "prisoner class," and the proposal for a hunger strike to empower this prisoner class as activists in a human rights struggle, emerged in the context of a "revolutionary book club" in which prisoners in the SHU Short Corridor read work by Howard Zinn, Naomi Wolf, Michel Foucault, and a history of the Irish Hunger Strikes (Ashker 2013; Wells-Wallace 2014). Building on these social and intellectual practices through the artifact of the book, prisoners in the Short Corridor repurposed the weaponized architecture of the SHU—including the racist oppositions that typically organize the social space of California prisons—in a way that collectivized their agency to remake the world.

Ashker emphasizes the importance of both a particular identification as members of a "prisoner class" and a universal commitment to "fighting for the common good of all" (2013). This connection between the particular and the universal makes a counter-hegemonic claim against the representation of poor and racialized groups as inherent threats to social life rather than co-constituents of a shared social world. As such, it reclaims a meaningful sense of personhood, starting from the shared experience of "similarly-situated" people who have joined together in collective action, and in resistance to the racist structures that would otherwise make it unthinkable for a white man covered in swastika tattoos, two Latino men from Northern and Southern Mexico, and several black men of diverse ethnic and political affiliations to collaborate with each other. In the context of this radical political organizing as a prisoner class, the language of "human rights" becomes a tool, repurposed from the discourse of liberal democracy, to universalize the struggle and to assert one's political personhood or "humanity" from a position of presumed monstrosity.

This counter-hegemonic orientation towards collective liberation, rooted in a plurality of different histories and social positions, is especially evident in the writing of New Afrikan prisoners such as Sitawa Jamaa, Mutope Duguma, and Kijana Askari, who situate the shared language of a "prisoner class" in relation to specific histories of slavery, racism, and Black survival, resistance, and revolution. In 2011, Duguma issued a call to prisoners across the California system, "as well as the free oppressed and non-oppressed people" beyond the prison walls, to set aside racial and regional hostilities and support a collective hunger strike by prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU. The text begins with a critical analysis of California prisoners' shared situation as a

¹⁷ See Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1* (2004) and Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology" (forthcoming) on the significance of the pledge for revolutionary politics.

form of “torture” and “civil death,” using concepts from broader political struggles to resignify both the space of the prison cell (from a site of criminal justice to a site of social injustice) and the self-understanding of prisoners (from isolated individuals and/or rival gang members, to members of a prisoner class, where the meaning of class remains intertwined with the meanings and histories of race). “The Call” concludes by calling forth an emergent “we” or collective political subject from a range of shifting subject-positions: as “I,” “you” and “them.”

I say that those of you who carry yourselves as principled human beings, no matter you're [*sic*] housing status, must fight to right this and other egregious wrongs. Although it is “us” today (united New Afrikans, Whites, Northern and Southern Mexicans, and others) it will be you all tomorrow. It is in your interests to peacefully support us in this protest today, and to beware of agitators, provocateurs, and obstructionists, because they are the ones who put ninety percent of us back here because they could not remain principled even within themselves. (Duguma 2011)

In other words: I say to you, or at least to some of you, that we are you, and tomorrow we will be all of you. You and I should form a we, in resistance to those who undermine our solidarity and reproduce the conditions of our torture. As such, “The Call” is the proleptic performance of a “we” that does not yet exist, but which cannot begin to exist without the capacity to understand oneself as a subject to whom the call is addressed. In other words, the text both issues and receives the call to create new forms of social life in resistance to social death.

As a testament to both the difficulty of this process and the persistence of prisoner-activists, a second “Agreement to End Hostilities” was issued on August 12, 2012 by the Short Corridor Collective. Sitawa Jamaa calls this agreement “an historical document ...We are a prisoner class now” (quoted in Wallace-Wells 2014, 6). The text calls upon all prisoners to set aside racial hostilities for the sake of uniting as a multi-racial prisoner class:

[N]ow is the time for us to *collectively seize this moment in time*, and put an end to more than 20-30 years of hostilities between our racial groups ...We can no longer allow CDCR to use us against each other for their benefit!! *Because the reality is that collectively, we are an empowered, mighty force*, that can positively change this entire corrupt system into a system that actually benefits prisoners, and thereby, the public as a whole. (Pelican Bay State Prison SHU Short Corridor Collective 2012; italics added)

The Agreement to End Hostilities calls upon prisoners to resist one form of collective self-understanding—institutional(ized) racism, where the logic of race is oppositional rather than differential, and where racial opposition overcodes personal disagreements as intractable instances of racial hostility—for the sake of another form of collective self-understanding as “an empowered, mighty force” with the capacity for political transformation, both within and beyond the prison walls. As such, the agreement func-

tions as a pledge, not just to fight collectively for the interests of a particular group of people, but also to stand together in solidarity as a collective force in resistance to the oppressive structures that might otherwise divide them.¹⁸ The call to “collectively seize this moment in time” re-animates the sense of dead or “broken” time articulated by prisoners at Pelican Bay. This is not just a matter of seizing an already-existing moment in objective time, but of collectively creating the moment to be seized, by interrupting the monotonous repetition of living death in the SHU. Again, this is the proleptic performance of a moment that will have been the decisive moment in which a prisoner class emerges, as long as it is grasped as such by a collective-subject-in-the-making.

The embodied social practice of speaking across both the material barriers of concrete walls and the social barriers of institutionalized racism is already a “re-making of the world” and a form of resistive architecture. But the Short Corridor Collective faced another challenge: to speak and act collectively in a way that was legible beyond the SHU as a form of effective political action. As convicted felons and validated gang members, their voices were either disqualified in advance or weaponized against each other as informants. And so the members of the Short Corridor Collective turned to a political discourse of last resort: the hunger strike.¹⁹

IV. THE HUNGER STRIKE AS A STRATEGIC WEAPONIZATION OF LIFE

A hunger strike is an act of political expression by those who are otherwise silenced by hegemonic power; it mobilizes the threat of biological death to reveal and contest a situation of social death. In effect, the wager of a hunger strike is this: if you weaponize my voice, my space, and the structure of my personhood against me, I will weaponize my life—and my capacity to die—against you.

In his analysis of the 1981 hunger strikes of political prisoners in Northern Ireland, which inspired the California hunger strikes at least in part, Allen Feldman argues that the strike action was both a “corporeal protest against injustice” and a way of “transcrib[ing] biological time into epochal time” (1991, 219, 225). The prisoners, whose status had been criminalized and de-politicized by a colonial penal system, weaponized their bodies against state power, first by refusing to wear prison uniforms, then by refusing to wash, and finally by refusing food. One protester explained:

¹⁸ The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) sought to discredit the hunger strike organizers by rejecting their self-description as activists engaged in a non-violent struggle for human rights, and reinforcing their status as validated gang members and associates. For example, Secretary of the CDCR Jeffrey Beard condemned the strike action as a “gang power play” in an Op-Ed for the LA Times: “Don’t be fooled ... We’re talking about convicted murderers who are putting lives at risk to advance their own agenda of violence” (Beard 2013).

¹⁹ In an expanded version of this paper, I would like to develop an account of political action by family members and friends of incarcerated organizers in the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Network, the majority of whom are women. In *Golden Gulag* (2005), Ruth Gilmore offers a brilliant analysis of the grassroots activism of Mothers ROC, and later of Families to Amend California’s Three Strikes. A similarly rich and detailed account of the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Network would be useful, both as an organizing tool and as a resource for political theory.

From the moment we entered the H-blocks we had used our bodies as a protest weapon. It came from an understanding that the Brits were using our bodies to break us. It wasn't just a prison movement. We began to identify with the oppressed all over the world. That's how full the circle had become. (Feldman 1991, 232)

This transformation of the body into a site of resistance and of global solidarity—even from the isolation of a prison cell—issued in a new “temporalization” of history” (Feldman 1991, 233). The Blanket protest and the Dirty protest had been going on for years, with no promise of resolution. But the hunger strikes created a situation in which the life and death of the body made things happen, a situation in which time was of the essence. The hunger strikers used the vulnerability and mortality of their bodies to force open an eschatological time in which the status quo could not be maintained indefinitely. A hunger strike is an end game: the lives of prisoners are literally on the line, and the meaning of these lives is raised beyond the (bio)political systems that enclose them by the life-or-death stakes of the strike action. Feldman's analysis of the Irish hunger strikes suggests that the key to political transformation from a space of extreme isolation is not just the re-tooling of weaponized architecture but also, more radically, the introduction of a new sense of time structured by the irreversibility of death, which exceeds the reversible logic of weapon and tool. And yet, this transformation entailed an incalculable loss: the death of Bobby Sands and nine other prisoners. It would take almost twenty years of continued struggle before a peace deal was finally brokered in 1998.

In her book, *Starve and Immolate: the Politics of Human Weapons* (2014), Banu Bargu analyzes the hunger strikes that took place in Turkey from 2000-2007 in response to the construction of supermax-style prison units. For Bargu, the Turkish hunger strikes did not just weaponize the bodies of prisoners; they weaponized life through the self-destruction of bodies. By “the weaponization of life,” Bargu means “the tactic of resorting to corporeal and existential practices of struggle, based on the technique of self-destruction, in order to make a political statement or advance political goals” (14). She argues that this weaponization of life:

. . . presents a paradoxical combination of instrumentality and the abolition of instrumentality. On the one hand, the body is an intermediary, a means of staging a protest that advances certain specific demands as the political ends of that protest. On the other hand, the body is not an empty, mediate vessel to achieve political ends precisely because its deployment only by way of its destruction defies the distinction between means and ends and obliterates instrumental rationality. (16)

This insurgent weaponization of life against the carceral weaponization of one's embodied, relational personhood in extreme isolation does not merely repurpose the weapon as a tool, or the tool as a weapon. Rather, it explodes this logic through the self-destruction of bodies. One hundred and twenty two people died in the Turkish hunger

strikes. Some hunger strikers continued their deathfast even after being released from prison as part of the state's attempt to undermine the strike action. Bargu coins the term "necroresistance" to name this radical "refusal against simultaneously individualizing and totalizing domination that acts by wrenching the power of life and death away from the apparatuses of the modern state in which this power is conventionally vested" (27).

The Irish and Turkish hunger strikes posed a direct challenge to the sovereign power of the state by exposing their bodies to the risk of death in order to demonstrate the illegitimacy of state violence. In the California prison hunger strikes, however, the tactic of a hunger strike was deployed more as a way of gaining access to state power, both through legislative hearings and through the courts. Is this a way of using the state's weapons against itself, or turning them into tools for reform, rather than weaponizing their own lives against the state? Were the California prison hunger strikes any less of a radical political movement than the Irish or Turkish hunger strikes, given their selective engagement with state power? Consider this passage from "The Call" to engage in hunger strikes:

Therefore we have decided to put our fate in our own hands. Some of us have already suffered a slow, agonizing death in which the state has shown no compassion toward these dying prisoners. Rather than compassion they turn up their ruthlessness. No one wants to die. Yet under this current system of what amounts to intense torture, what choice do we have? If [we are] to die, it will be on our own terms. (Duguma 2011)

On the one hand, this statement resonates with the analysis of hunger strikes by Feldman and Bargu. The irreversibility of biological death is deployed, at least discursively, against the logic of social death for the sake of a more meaningful life and death. The tactic of the hunger strike opens a political temporality of radical transformation and collective liberation, beyond the reversible logic of weapon and tool, resistance and retaliation, reform and co-optation. And yet, on the other hand, Duguma is careful not to underestimate or celebrate the risk of death. The statement, "No one wants to die," underlines the goal of better living conditions in prison, while situating this more modest goal within an abolitionist horizon of world-remaking through bridge-building.²⁰

In the context of the Pelican Bay SHU, the hunger strikes were an effective tactic for repurposing the weaponized architecture of the SHU, and for opening negotiations with the state that were unthinkable even five years ago. But this is quite different from the direct challenge to state power that both Feldman and Bargu associate with hunger strikes as a necropolitical tactic. The ambivalence of being willing to die, but publically announcing that one does not want to die, suggests a different logic of protest from the Irish deathfasts. (One person did die in the California prison hunger strikes—Billy "Guero" Sell—but it is not clear if his death was directly related to self-starvation (Law 2013).) Ultimately, I think the power of

²⁰ Compare Bargu's acknowledgement that the practice of the hunger strike "often has a metaphysical element attached to it, an element regarding the meaning of existence. The self-destructive act makes a commentary on the meaning of life by conveying the prioritization of the life of a political cause over the biological existence of its proponents. These acts say, in a sense, it is not worth living life if you cannot live it according to your own political convictions" (2014, 16).

the 2013 hunger strikes lies not only—and perhaps not primarily—in the weaponization of bodies or of life, but in the seemingly humble practices of world-remaking, such as everyday conversation and writing, which create networks of solidarity and mutual support, both within the SHU and beyond. In other words, the political act of organizing the hunger strikes was just as important, if not more important than the strike action itself. The Short Corridor Collective, together with the Hunger Strike Solidarity Network, has undertaken a collective practice of repurposing weaponized architecture, which is just as crucial for abolitionist politics as the eschatological temporality of dismantling oppressive structures through the self-destruction of incarcerated bodies. The master’s tools may never dismantle the master’s house, but it remains to be seen whether the master’s weapons can be repurposed as new and radically different tools for world-(re)making (Lorde 2007).

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