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The Color of Transcendence: Whiteness, Sovereignty, and the Theologico-Political

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ABSTRACT
This essay reads Jacques Derrida's analysis of the death penalty – which he interprets as the most fundamental instantiation of sovereign, theologico-political power over life and death – in relation to the "whiteness" that structures US carcerality. Elaborating upon Derrida's conception of the theologico-political, I theorize whiteness as a mode of theologico-political transcendence: whiteness both comes to be conceptually via theological reasoning and materially mimics aspects of the worldordering traits of divine power. The world that whiteness ultimately orders is a carceral one that secures its supremacy by way of mechanisms – death penalties – of captivity, dispossession, and control. Extending Derrida's theorization beyond capital punishment and its strictly sovereign configurations, I suggest that carceral death penalties more broadly conceived should be understood not just as a matter of isolatable sovereign decision on life and death but as the (white) power to arrange the world in ways that determine proximity to life and death.

KEYWORDS
Derrida; Foucault; death penalty; carceral; whiteness; theologico-political; sovereignty; transcendence

Introduction

In the first minutes of the first session of his death penalty seminars, Jacques Derrida posits that to speak of the death penalty is to speak of "political theology," of religion, "of the religion always present at the death penalty, of the death penalty as religion."[1] By this, Derrida is theorizing about more than just the fact that a significant portion of Christians in the US supports the death penalty.[2] Derrida is most interested, rather, in what might be called the form or the logic of the death penalty as a phenomenon whose rational structure is distinctly theological, or what he calls "theologico-political." By "theologico-political," Derrida means a set of operations marked by a sovereignty that consists in the power to take and to give life, to execute and to pardon, to determine what does and does not constitute a threat to social order. In other words, the sovereignty undergirding the death penalty is *theologico*-political because it structures arrangements in which a sovereign wields the *god*like power to decide whether a person will exist within or without the boundaries of citizenship and life. A key theologico-political concept at work in the structures of sovereignty, Derrida argues, is transcendence, the beyond-ness of an

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[1] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 2.

[2] Ibid., 75. See also: Michael Lipka, "U.S. Religious Groups Differ."

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invisible, absent, godlike power that determines life and death,[3] a transcendence, moreover, that is inscribed in the very structure of western criminal law itself, enabling it to enact death penalties in the first place.[4] Grounded in this transcendent form of power, Derrida suggests that death-penalty-enacting sovereignty constitutes the "hyphen" joining the theological to the political.[5] Attending to this hyphen, and to the theological and political operations that it connects, Derrida ultimately argues, is necessary for understanding – and successfully opposing – the death penalty.[6]

Derrida's seminars are concerned primarily with *the* death penalty in the sense of execution or capital punishment, and less with the carceral state or society within which the death penalty is handed down, which is why Derrida focuses on the category of sovereignty: of all the mechanisms of the carceral state, execution is perhaps the most explicitly sovereign decision over life and death for the reason that it fixes the boundary point between life and death with such precision.[7] However, because capital punishment is only one among many "death penalties" utilized in US carcerality, and because the death penalty is adequately understood only in relation to the carceral society within which it operates, this essay reads Derrida's seminars in relation to US carceral death penalties more broadly conceived. There is death, in other words, by hanging, guillotine, the electric chair, firing squad, and lethal injection, but there is also death by criminalization, policing, surveillance, indebtedness, jail cell, prison cell, solitary confinement, inadequate prison healthcare, post-release disenfranchisement, and a range of other forms of captivity, containment, and dispossession. Understanding the former, I suggest, requires attending to the forces that also structure the latter.

Toward that end, this essay reads Derrida's theorization of theologico-political sovereignty in relation to the "whiteness" that structures US carcerality, a fundamental feature of the US context to which Derrida is only partially attentive in his death penalty seminars. My basic premise is that Derrida's analysis of the dynamics of sovereign power, the death penalty, and the transcendental character of the mechanisms that comprise them, helpfully clarifies aspects of the theologico-political character of capital punishment, but needs further elaboration in order to help us understand the full theologico-political and racial character of US carceral death penalties more broadly conceived. In the broader context of US carcerality beyond capital punishment, sovereign power is not the fundamental tie that binds – or "hyphen" that joins – the theological to the political in service of carceral death penalties more broadly understood, because the power that forges and engines US carcerality as a whole is power that circulates more complexly than through the dyad of sovereign and subject. At the prompting of Michel Foucault, I suggest that in order to adequately understand and enable resistance to contemporary US carcerality and the racial logic of whiteness that orders it, it is necessary to think power beyond its sovereign (singular, localized, and purely repressive) forms alone, and instead as a mode of power that is dispersed, multivalent, and concerned with the management of bodies and populations. In the context of US carcerality, whiteness is one of the most fundamental manifestations of this power. Read alongside Foucault's complexification, Derrida's own work provides resources for discerning the theologico-political character of whiteness. In addition to his theorization of theologico-political transcendence – elaborated beyond the category of sovereignty – Derrida's early essay on "white mythology" and his frequent interventions on the "phantasmatic" nature of theologico-political phenomena serve as critical tools for understanding not just sovereignty but whiteness as a mode of theologico-political transcendence.

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[3] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 145.

[4] Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 143–5.

[5] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 22–3.

[6] As will become clear over the course of this essay, Derrida's use of the term "theological" refers in a general sense to godlike conceptualities and practices. Derrida was not a "theologian" in any traditional (Christian or Jewish) sense of the term. And yet, his work is indeed theological insofar as it takes seriously that knowledge of theological concepts can help us understand the institutions and practices that structure our world. In this essay, I use the term "theological" in much the same way that Derrida does, while also introducing more traditional theological concepts as a way of extending Derrida's political-theological analysis into dimensions of "theology" that Derrida did not explore but that might help further illuminate the phenomena he interpreted.

[7] Ibid., 218–22.

Understood as a social, political, and economic force that includes but encompasses more than either pigmentation or identity position alone, I theorize whiteness as a mode of theologico-political transcendence for the reason that it both comes to be conceptually via theological reasoning, on the one hand, and materially mimics and approximates aspects of the world-ordering traits of divine power, on the other. If whiteness orders the world, the world it orders, I suggest, is a carceral one: whiteness secures itself – in all its social, political, and economic dimensions – against that which threatens it by way of carceral mechanisms of captivity and control broadly conceived. As such, death penalties should be understood not just as a matter of isolatable sovereign decision on life and death but as the power to arrange the world in ways that determine proximity to life and death. It is for this reason that I argue that in the context of US carcerality, whiteness – rather than sovereignty, as Derrida suggests – is the hyphen that connects the theological to the political in service of death penalties broadly conceived. The work of this essay, therefore, is to widen Derrida's conception of the "theologico-political" – including through retrieval and redeployment of his own work – to adequately account for the way whiteness manifests a pseudo-divine aspiration to govern the world from beyond the world by managing and containing forms of life it constructs as threats to its supremacy.

The essay will proceed as follows. First, I put Derrida's theorization of sovereign, theologico-political transcendence into conversation with Foucault's complexification of sovereign power in order to establish the possibility of theorizing theologico-political transcendence beyond strictly sovereign configurations. Second, I engage Foucault and philosopher Ladelle McWhorter to convey the formation and scope of whiteness as a force with social, political, and economic dimensions. Third, and finally, reading Derrida and Foucault together alongside theologians and theorists of race and carcerality, I show how whiteness might be understood as a mode of theologico-political transcendence that does not simply "decide" upon life and death but arranges the conditions that determine proximity to life and death, seen most explicitly in the mechanisms – the death penalties – of US carcerality.

Derrida's "theologico-political" and Foucault's complexification

Derrida interprets the death penalty as the most fundamental manifestation of sovereign power over life and death, which he reads by way of two political philosophers: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Carl Schmitt. For Rousseau, sovereignty is the right over life and death in the sense that a sovereign is one who gives security and liberty – and therefore life itself – to citizens who would otherwise struggle to obtain and maintain it in exchange for obedience to the law and renunciation of limitless freedom.[8] Because the sovereign is the living embodiment of the people's collective will for the good, obedience to the sovereign is obedience to one's own will. As such, one who violates the state's laws literally "ceases to be a member of [his country]; he even makes war upon it," which Rousseau suggests is simply to consent to social – or, when necessary, biological – death.[9] Writing a century and a half after Rousseau, Carl Schmitt argues that a sovereign is one to whom it is left to *decide* what and who constitutes a threat to social order, a threat, in turn, that necessitates an exception to the law, a lifting of the normal rule of law in order to re-secure the order that the rule of law upholds. By extension, "he" who decides what constitutes a threat to order also decides what constitutes, to begin with, the order that is initially disturbed. Thus, for Schmitt, sovereign is he who determines both the rule and the exception to the rule.[10]

Taking up the general form of sovereignty articulated by Rousseau and Schmitt, Derrida understands sovereignty as residing in a localizable power-wielding subject whose power consists in deciding who will be included in and who will be excluded from the boundaries of citizenship, and especially of life.[11] But as much as the power to condemn one to death, Derrida argues, the power of the sovereign is the power to forgive, to pardon, to offer "grace," something utterly undeserved that does not compute in the calculus of law and order and *lex talionis*.[12] As such, it is only the sovereign that is capable of granting it, of suspending the laws of law and order – like a miracle, as Schmitt suggests[13] – in order to forgive. In this way, Derrida theorizes pardon not as the shedding of sovereign power over life, but as a fundamental expression of it: sovereignty "is marked by the right of life and death over the citizen" – both life *and* death, death *and* life.[14]

It is this godlike power of decision over life and death that leads Derrida to conclude that it is impossible to talk about the death penalty without talking about religion. Derrida argues that the sovereign power made manifest in the execution of death penalties is the glue, the hyphen that holds together the theological and the political. He writes:

> If one wants to ask oneself "What is the death penalty?" or "What is the essence and the meaning of the death penalty?" it will indeed be necessary to reconstitute this history and this horizon of sovereignty as the hyphen in the theologico-political.[15]

For the same reason, Derrida suggests that to speak of the theologico-political is also, by default, to speak of the death penalty: "the theologico-political is a system, an apparatus of sovereignty in which the death penalty is necessarily inscribed. There is theologico-political wherever there is death penalty."[16] The condemnation to death declared by the sovereign power who controls life and who controls death – who even determines the exact instant of a subject's death – constitutes a theological power because it instantiates the godlike ability to fix, with calculating precision, the exact boundary point between life and death.[17] This being at the mercy or under the judgment of another is, for Derrida, related to the instrumentalization of time as a form of cruelty: "One cannot think cruelty without time, the time given or the time taken, time that becomes the calculation of the other, time delivered up to the calculating decision of the other … ."[18] The death penalty is *the* instantiation of the sovereign theologico-political for Derrida because it consists in a decision from "beyond" subjects that, in merely making a decision, sustains life or ends it with omnipotent effectiveness.

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[8] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 207; and Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, footnote 20: "In other words, the citizen receives his life from the state, and therefore has no right over his life" (15).

[9] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 209.

[10] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5–12; and Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 83–8.

[11] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 5, 83–8.

[12] Ibid., 2, 47, 64, 145.

[13] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

[14] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 5.

[15] Ibid., 22–3.

[16] Ibid., 23.

A key characteristic of the theologico-political, Derrida argues, is a kind of transcendence, a power from beyond finitude that is more or less without limitations of space or time, an omnipotent ability to declare and effect judgment and verdict, to condemn to death or pardon to life. In the sixth session of the first volume of his death penalty seminars, Derrida explores the meaning and function of the telephone in the control room in the place of executions that connects to the invisible sovereign who has the power to call in grace from beyond. This "telephone to the beyond,"[19] Derrida writes, "is a figure … of what I will call the technics of transcendence, and, what is more, the technics of this teleferic relation to the sovereignty of the absent other, of the absent God." Derrida goes on to explain the way in which governors in the US have the ability to call, up to the very last minute, the execution chamber, and to call off the execution, to pronounce the grace of pardon or stay. It is this telephone, Derrida writes, "that links … the place of execution to the mouth and the ear of the place of sovereignty, with the governor who holds the quasi-divine power of pardoning."[20] This technical device, Derrida argues, is a phenomenal means by which sovereignty, as transcendent, effects its power. As Derrida argues elsewhere, these theologico-political, transcendent characteristics of the mechanisms and application of the death penalty are not random elements of an otherwise non-theological system, but are rather constitutive elements of a system that is, from its beginning, grounded in a sovereign, theologico-political transcendence, a beyond-the-law that is the condition that enables law and order itself.[21]

Historically prior to the telephone, Derrida explores the phenomenon of the guillotine, created by a Jesuit doctor who envisioned this new form of killing as a significant humanitarian progress in that it supposedly reduced the suffering of death to a split second, rather than drawing it out in excessive cruelty – a vision that was ultimately less successful than its creator had hoped.[22] The theologically transcendent character of the device's conceptualization is worth noting. As Derrida writes, "the guillotine is no one. At once inhuman and superhuman, almost divine. And there is something like religiosity in the climate of this guillotine rising up toward the sky beneath the sky."[23] The guillotine is viewed as a humanitarian progress not only because it reduces the pain of death to an almost painless instant, but also because the machine begins to operate itself, while the human hand slowly removes itself from the inflicting of death.[24] As such, the guillotine – coming from above, operating almost independently of human volition – functions as a mechanism of transcendence, a power of death that seems to operate beyond human agency. By showing how the material mechanisms that implement the death penalty instantiate an "almost divine" power to decide upon and implement the boundary between life and death, Derrida helps us see how the death penalty, as an act of sovereign decision, constitutes a theologico-political phenomenon that does its work from some beyond. But does an interpretive frame that perceives only sovereign configurations of power tell us all that we need to know about how the theological and the political fuse in service of death penalties of all kinds today?

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[17] Ibid., 218–22.
[18] Ibid., 220.
[19] Ibid., 139.
[20] Ibid., 145.
[21] Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 142–5.
[22] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 190–217.
[23] Ibid., 62–3.

For Derrida, as well as for Rousseau and Schmitt, the analogy between a political sovereign and a divine one is both philosophically and historically evident. Such an analogy has indeed undergirded political systems throughout history, especially in pre-modern epochs.[25] And yet, while sovereign forms of power certainly persist into modernity, modalities of power that exceed the definitional boundaries of sovereignty emerge in the modern era, requiring new theorizations of how power works in relation to human life and society. Derrida's contemporary Michel Foucault devoted a significant portion of his work to theorizing how power intervenes upon and helps forge human subjectivities in modernity.[26] According to Foucault, in order to grasp the depth of power's reach in modernity, one must understand power as residing not merely in the singular, localized, clearly observable, repressive power-wielding sovereign subject, but rather in more dispersed, circulating, and productive forms.[27] As Foucault put it in a 1979 interview,

> the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. In defining the effects of power as repression … one identifies power with a law which says no … . [Power] needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.[28]

Complexifying classical conceptions of power, Foucault argues that sovereignty, a "subject-to-subject" mode of power operating primarily in terms of juridical law, is conceptually limited in its ability to adequately describe how power actually circulates through multifaceted "relationships of domination" across multiple social and political strata.[29]

Foucault identifies two predominant forms of sovereign power's transfiguration in modernity. First, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Foucault discerns the emergence of "disciplinary" power, which focuses on the body as a site of normalization, individuation, and control.[30] Second, in the late eighteenth century, there emerges what Foucault calls "biopower," which is concerned with the biological processes of life at the level of species and population.[31] Disciplinary power consists of regimented techniques that focus on bodies as sites of power and productivity, while biopower moves through networks of life itself, not just individuals and bodies. Thus, disciplinary power is "individualizing" insofar as it is concerned with "man-as-body," while biopower is "massifying" in that it is concerned with "man-as-living-being" or "man-as-species."[32] Foucault holds that sovereign power has not been "replaced by" these new forms of power; rather, he argues that with the advent of biopower in particular, the old sovereign right "to take life or let live" has been permeated by the ability to "'make' live and 'let' die," thereby emphasizing that modern power's life-giving and death-dealing capacities are more complex than the objectively recognizable mechanisms of sovereign pardon or condemnation.[33] In other words, sovereignty transfigured in modernity is the power not merely to end life or pardon it, but the power to take control of and manage bodies and life in such a way that they can be made useful when needed and slowly eradicated when certain forms of life are deemed either unnecessary or a threat to the maintenance of normative forms of life and the human species as a whole.

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[24] Ibid., 193.

[25] See: Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*.

[26] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 777.

[27] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 29.

[28] Foucault, "Truth and Power," 119.

[29] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 38–46.

[30] Ibid., 36–40.

[31] Ibid., 239–63.

While there is much to consider in Foucault's analysis, my interest for the purposes of this essay is in considering what occurs in the space between Derrida's "theologico-political" and Foucault's complexification of sovereign power. A question that arises while thinking Derrida and Foucault together on the question of theologico-political power is whether or not the theologico-political that undergirds sovereign power loses its descriptive purchase, and therefore its critical relevance, when sovereign power – the "hyphen" that joins the theological to the political, according to Derrida – no longer adequately describes predominant political power in late modernity. To put it another way, if sovereignty is no longer the center of modern configurations of power, does that mean that the theologico-political that Derrida describes as foundational to it also diminishes as new forms of power emerge? As I attempt to show in what remains, the transfiguration of sovereign power in modernity does not signal the end of the theologico-political that is indeed central to it. On the contrary, just as sovereign power transfigures in modernity, so does the theologico-political, which I suggest persists beyond its strictly sovereign configurations in the form of the "whiteness" that helps structure social, political, and economic life in modernity.[34] More specifically, I argue that the category of transcendence, elaborated somewhat beyond Derrida's deployment of it, is not limited to strictly sovereign political configurations, but also operates within and serves as a fruitful descriptor of aspects of the complexified – and, as we will see, racialized – forms of power that Foucault outlines.

The political-economic formation and scope of whiteness

In order to adequately understand how whiteness constitutes a mode of theologico-political transcendence, we must first establish core aspects of the political and economic formation and scope of whiteness.[35] Foucault's most critical insight for the purposes of this essay is that the complexification of power beyond strictly sovereign configurations, particularly under regimes of "biopower," corresponds with, and even creates the conditions for, the appearance of race as a fundamental organizing principle in modernity. If biopower is the power "to *make* live and to *let* die,"[36] the point at which biopower "lets die," Foucault suggests, is the point at which racism becomes most discernible. As he writes:

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[32] Ibid., 242–3.

[33] Ibid., 241.

[34] While Foucault, in much of his work, does identify religious or theological themes operating within modern configurations of subject-making power, he does not explicitly identify whiteness as one such site manifesting a theological rationale.

[35] Because a full encapsulation of the formation and scope of whiteness as theorized by a wide array of scholars would be encyclopedic in size, this intervention is inevitably selective.

> [Racism] is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. […] It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population. […] That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower.[37]

More than merely instituting caesuras that correspond to "races," Foucault argues that the telos of biopower is the purification of the species: a making live made possible by the letting die of that which threatens the species. As Foucault writes, inhabiting the voice of this logic:

> "The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I – as species rather than individual – can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate." The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer.[38]

The racism of biopower, then, is the racism of the biological in the sense of the health of the population, which necessitates the letting die of that which threatens the health of the species as a whole, the apex of which is understood to reside in the white race. As Ellen Armour, engaging Foucault scholar Ladelle McWhorter, summarizes: "modern (biopolitical) racism is first and foremost a racism *for*. In the name of nurturing the (human) race by eliminating what threatens it, it activates and animates racisms *against* certain human populations."[39]

McWhorter elaborates upon Foucault's genealogy of racism in a way that enables us to gain a deeper sense of the role whiteness – as opposed to just "race," in Foucault's parlance – plays in ordering life in modernity. Whereas Foucault's genealogy moves straight from the "race war" discourse of the seventeenth century and earlier to the "scientific" or "biological" racism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and beyond,[40] McWhorter's moves from race war discourse, to "morphological" racism of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and finally on to scientific, biopolitical racism in its modern form. As such, McWhorter argues that it is not Nazi Germany that gives us the first instantiation of state racism, as Foucault argues, but rather England's Virginia Colony, and subsequently the US.[41] On McWhorter's analysis, race in its morphological definition articulated and subsequently tabulated whiteness by focusing on the alleged naturalness of phenotype and physicality as marks that classified and so distinguished people of European descent from people of African descent. But the morphological conceptualization of race did not take shape in a vacuum: as McWhorter shows, elaborating on the work of others before her, even when whiteness was defined morphologically, it was so defined for the purposes of securing a plantation capitalist economy against that which threatened it. Facing the challenge of the commodity-value-reducing upward mobility of former indentured servants of European descent, on the one hand, and plantation-economy-threatening solidarity between laborers of European and African descent, on the other, the colonial American planter class utilized morphological difference as a way of fracturing working class and underclass solidarities and justifying lifelong African enslavement. As McWhorter writes:

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[36] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 241 (emphasis mine).

[37] Ibid., 254–5.

[38] Ibid., 255. See also: Foucault, *Abnormal*.

[39] Armour, *Signs & Wonders*, 30. Cf. Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression*.

[40] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*. As Foucault and McWhorter both explain, "race" under race war discourse referred not to physicality or biological essence, but to culture, language, lineage, tradition, and so on. As such, race under race war definitions was articulated as a binary within the social body in which "race" could apply, for instance, to Normans on the one hand and Saxons on the other.

[41] McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression*, 17–140.

> What the planters exploited to reinforce the institution of African slavery through the last third of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth was not preexisting racism; it was literally the differences among laborers in physical appearance, religion, and language. They played on those differences to create antagonisms that eventually became antiblack racism. Wealthy landholders incited antiblack racism, historians such as Edmund Morgan and Theodore Allen argue, by destroying solidarity between laborers of European descent and laborers of African descent and then by persuading European Americans to accept and eventually help enforce African Americans' enslavement.[42]

The owning colonial class of European descent forged "whiteness" as a possess-able and exclusive identity, in other words, as a way of securing the means and maintenance of their wealth, which highlights both the conceptual and material inseparability of the production of capital and the production of race in the context of American colonialism and chattel slavery.[43] As McWhorter summarizes, "morphological race is an Anglo-American invention, worked out in the give-and-take of material interests and legal and political institutions on the North American continent,"[44] a process that McWhorter shows was further buttressed through efforts in natural science to "tabulate natural entities" that would in turn justify the appropriateness of the *lifelong* servitude of Africans and the economic order of which it was a part.[45]

In the wake of race understood as a matter of physical morphology, McWhorter argues, complexifying Foucault's genealogy, race eventually comes to be understood in terms of biological essence, the hallmark of biopolitical racism. What happens in the transition from morphological racism to biological racism is that race, and indeed all life itself, comes to be conceived in terms of development – a key concept in the field of biology – which, in turn, transforms race into "a temporal phenomenon that can be characterized by normality, deviance, or pathology."[46] As such, according to McWhorter, "race came to be a matter of function, not structure per se: differently raced bodies *behaved* differently."[47] On McWhorter's read, race's shift from morphology to biology also marks the shift from modes of sovereign and juridical power that deduces or subtracts or excludes life forms, to modes of normalizing and biopolitical power that polices and manages populations based upon normalities and abnormalities.[48] Unlike sovereign power that punishes criminal actions, biopower manages forms of life – e.g., blackness – understood to be inherently prone to certain (criminal) dispositions, thereby requiring mechanisms including carceral intervention as a means of protecting the species from what threatens its health and survival.

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[42] Ibid., 72. See: Allen, *Invention of White Race*; and Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*.

[43] See: Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*; Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Roediger, *How Race Survived*; Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism*; Allen, *Invention of White Race*; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; and Johnson and Kelley, *Race Capitalism Justice*.

[44] McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression*, 73.

[45] Ibid., 77.

[46] Ibid., 96.

[47] Ibid.

The foregoing analysis helps us see just some of the ways in which "whiteness," in both its origins and scope, signifies more than it often does in popular usages of the term. In short, whiteness includes but is not conceptually exhausted by reference to either pigmentation variation or individual or collective identity possession: whiteness includes but ultimately encapsulates – both conceptually and materially – more than "skin color" and "white people" as such. Whiteness is a social, political, and economic way of arranging bodies and populations in ways that secure exclusively held power. As such, while whiteness certainly represents a phenotypically (i.e., pigmentation) marked, localizable, agential subject position, it also must be understood as a supra-agential, institutional force, forged and maintained in the fires of capitalism, that manages forms of life by ordering the conditions within which they exist.[49] It is in this context of whiteness understood in its world-ordering capacity that we can begin to perceive how whiteness constitutes not just a political but a *theologico*-political phenomenon, a mode of theologico-political transcendence.

Whiteness as theologico-political transcendence

Derrida argues that sovereignty is the hyphen that joins the theological to the political in service of the death penalty. Foucault argues that the relationship between subjects and society in modernity exceeds strictly sovereign configurations. If it is true that sovereignty is no longer the predominant configuration of power in modernity, does that mean that the theologico-political that sovereignty instantiates also disappears as new configurations of power emerge? Against the backdrop of Foucault's suggestion that racism emerges beyond sovereignty as a tool for managing forms of life perceived as a threat to the human species, I retrieve and synthesize Derrida's concepts of "white mythology" and theologico-political "phantasm" to argue that the theologico-political does persist beyond sovereignty, and that it does so through the whiteness that orders life, makes subjects, and undergirds carceral death penalties in modernity in fundamental ways. Between Derrida and Foucault, and in conversation with theologians and theorists of race and carcerality, I theorize whiteness as an aspiration to the transcendence of finitude that fuses the theological and the political in service of carceral death penalties broadly conceived.

What does it mean to say that whiteness fuses the theological and the political? Whiteness fuses the theological and the political, first, in the sense that Christian theological reasoning provides what J. Kameron Carter calls the "inner architecture of modern racial reasoning."[50] On Carter's account, the modern idea of "race," and the "racial imagination" with which the modern west views and orders the world, comes about as a result of Christianity's "quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots," which Carter argues happens in two steps. First, Jews were "cast as a race group in contrast to Western Christians." This is the "racial" distinction, the result of which is that Christian-ness and Western-ness (whiteness) become more or less synonymous.[51] Second, having been racialized, Jews were cast as inferior and Christians superior, which Carter calls the "racist" distinction.[52] As a result, whiteness "came to function as a substitute for the Christian doctrine of creation, thus producing a reality into which all else must enter."[53] It is in this way, Carter argues, that whiteness "signifies not merely pigmentation but a regime of political and economic power for arranging … the world."[54] Willie Jennings likewise argues that just as God, in the Barthian tradition, is revealed through the divine action of creation, so whiteness's action in the world reveals it to be a pseudo-divine "creative authority" that *re*creates the world according to its supremacy.[55] To say that whiteness is the "creative authority" to "arrange" the world is to say, in short, that whiteness exists not merely as isolatable, inhabitable identity position but as the power to forge and implement anthropological delineations geographically, politically, economically, and culturally, and to do so under the presumption of divine legitimacy. Nearly one hundred years before Carter and Jennings, W. E. B. Du Bois provided insight into the scope of the world-forging power of whiteness by interpreting it as a "new religion" that consists in laying godlike claim to the universe. Providing perhaps the most succinct summary on the matter, he writes: "whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!"[56]

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[48] Ibid., 101.

[49] Whiteness's power to manage "forms of life by ordering the conditions within which they exist," while seemingly all encompassing, should not be understood as foreclosing the possibility of resistance to it, though it does likely indicate the need for shifts in the targets, tactics, and strategies of resistance to whiteness.

[50] Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, 5.

As we begin to see from these analyses, whiteness is a theologico-political phenomenon not only for the reason that it comes to be via Christian theological reasoning, nor only because it conceptualizes itself as the apex of moral superiority and a medium of divine presence, which it certainly does. In addition to these things, whiteness, in both its capacities and concrete operation in the world, is a theologico-political phenomenon because it exercises power that *materially* mimics and approximates aspects of divine power.[57] While Derrida does not theorize the theologico-political in terms of race in his death penalty seminars, a synthesis of elements from his larger corpus, including his death penalty seminars, can help us begin to discern how whiteness is a theologico-political phenomenon not only for the reason that it comes about via Christian theological reasoning but because it is an aspiration to godlike power. Derrida's early work consists primarily in critique of the fundamental underlying presuppositions of western metaphysical philosophy and linguistics. In his 1971 essay, "White Mythology," Derrida interrogates the world-transcending pretensions of the language of western philosophy, which works by erasing evidence of its own finite invention, casting itself as natural and original, and thereby of universal, infinite value.[58] Such universalist aspirations are evident, Derrida suggests, in the fact that western metaphysics makes meaning and articulates reality by way of concepts that negate, transcend, and strive for mastery over worldliness: "absolute, in-finite, in-tangible, non-Being."[59] The world-transcending aspirations of metaphysics, Derrida ultimately argues, make it a "white mythology" for the reason that it "reassembles and reflects the culture of the West," and in so doing serves as the means by which "the white man" defines himself and his reason as the manifestation of "universal" "Reason" writ large.[60] Metaphysics and whiteness, in other words, are inseparably bound, and are each characterized by the desire to negate, transcend, and master the world.[61]

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[51] Cf. McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression*: "in 1705 Virginians did not as yet refer simply to 'white people'; they resorted to a religious category – 'Christian' – and a list of disjuncts – not negro, not mulatto, not Indian" (74).

[52] Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, 4.

[53] Ibid., 5.

[54] Ibid., 35.

[55] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 60.

[56] Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 18.

[57] To say that whiteness approximates divine power is not, of course, to say that it is good. It is also not to dismiss the idea or reality of God or transcendence as such. My critical concern here is not with Christian theology in itself, but with a particular death-dealing deployment of it. As we will see, whiteness approximates divinity *exclusively*, empowering itself by disempowering others, which is precisely why it is so death-dealing to those who exist beyond its boundaries. As such, when I say that whiteness approximates divine power I am saying that it is worthy not of praise, but abolition. For more on the idea of the "abolition" of whiteness, see: Roediger, *Towards Abolition of Whiteness*; and Olson, *Abolition of White Democracy*.

In addition to his insights on the racial character of western (European) philosophical traditions, Derrida explores the value-producing effacement of origins and transcendence of finitude through the concept of "phantasm." For Derrida, "phantasm" is that which aspires to transcend phenomenality and finitude in pursuit of an "unscathed" "life beyond life," an existence beyond the limits of facticity.[62] Phantasm names a theologico-political power because it consists in the "omnipotent fantasy"[63] that it is possible to exceed and master time, space, and life itself. This "phantasm of infinitization" that manifests especially in the calculation and mastery exercised through death penalties, Derrida argues, might indeed be understood as "the origin of phantasm in general. And perhaps of what is called religion."[64] Though Derrida does not treat phantasm in terms of race in his death penalty seminars, he argues elsewhere that racism in its many forms is a prime manifestation of the phantasmatic pursuit of purity, particularly in the context of state racism, as in the case of South African apartheid.[65] "Deconstruction" – the philosophical project with which Derrida is most popularly associated – is, according to Michael Naas, "first and foremost, a deconstruction of the phantasm, a deconstruction of any putatively pure origin, indeed, of any phantasm of purity."[66] Because deconstruction is deconstruction of phantasms of purity, deconstruction is also, Derrida suggests, "the deconstruction of racism," of "the conditions of the possibility of racism," of "the roots of racism."[67] Phantasm names the theologico-political aspiration to exercise powers and capacities that transcend the limits of finitude and its manifold vulnerabilities. If racism is one such phantasmatic aspiration, and, as Derrida argues, if Schmitt is right that every instance of the political is also an instance of the theologico-political, then "every racism *as* political is theologico-political through and through."[68] Elaborating upon Derrida's own theorization, we might posit more explicitly that more than just "racism" in general, whiteness in particular constitutes a phantasm, a theologico-political instantiation of the phantasmatic pursuit of a purity beyond the limits of finitude and its vulnerabilities.

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[58] Derrida cites a passage in a work by Anatole France in which the character Polyphilos posits that metaphysicians are like "knife-grinders" that efface inscriptions on coins that signify their value and origin. In so doing, metaphysicians carry out the multivalent work implied in the word "usure": both erasing and producing surplus value – two "indistinguishable" parts of the same process. Freed "from all limits of time and space," Polyphilos, and Derrida, suggest, the coins – the language – of metaphysics are re-inscribed with "an inestimable value," an "exchange value extended indefinitely." Derrida, "White Mythology," 210.

[59] Derrida, "White Mythology," 211.

[60] Ibid., 213.

[61] As Barnor Hesse, elaborating on Derrida's work, suggests, white mythologies comprise the "rhetoric of modernity" that make meaning and shape the world through western, Christian, European colonialism. Hesse, "Racialized Modernity." While the particularities of whiteness in Europe and North America – and the racisms they deploy – are not entirely identical throughout history, it is nevertheless the case that racialized colonialism binds these continents to the extent that we may speak of "whiteness," as Hesse does, presuming a transatlantic coherency. As James Baldwin put it, to speak of whiteness in the North American context is to speak of "the European vision of the world … the European vision of the universe." Baldwin, "On Being White … ," 166.

[62] Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, 203. Derrida theorizes phantasm largely in terms of sovereignty, but as I aim to show in what follows, it is a concept that provides critical insight beyond strictly sovereign political configurations.

[63] Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 106; and Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, 195.

[64] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 258.

[65] Derrida, "Racism's Last Word," 57. By theorizing racism as a phantasmatic pursuit of purity, Derrida aligns somewhat with Foucault, who, as we saw above, understands (biopolitical) racism as the means by which societies purify themselves of perceived abnormalities.

[66] Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, 191.

Whiteness is a theologico-political phenomenon because it comes to be via Christian theological reasoning *and* because it is a phantasmatic aspiration to godlike transcendence of finitude. Attending more precisely to the traits – the pseudo-divine attributes – of whiteness will enable us to discern still more thoroughly how it is that whiteness is a mode of theologico-political transcendence, and indeed the hyphen that connects the theological and the political in service of carceral death penalties more broadly conceived.

In the modern west, particularly in the US, whiteness is all-pervasive, approximating omnipresence, and yet, as Derrida suggests, both its presence and the extent of its power remain more or less hidden from popular view. As George Lipsitz demonstrates at length in his work, whiteness is at once "everywhere" and yet "very hard to see": having helped order social, political, and economic life in modernity, whiteness structures western society in such a way that being "white" means access to greater wealth, health, employment, education, security, and power. And yet, because it is "the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations."[69] Willie Jennings similarly argues that whiteness in the context of theologically legitimated European colonial ventures came to signify not just European identity but "the rarely spoken but always understood organizing conceptual frame" of the modern world altogether, thereby leaving blackness to signify "the ever-visible counterweight of a usually *invisible* white identity."[70] The invisibility and unspoken-ness of whiteness is a consequence of its self-construction as absolutely distinct from non-whiteness to the point that whiteness transcends the category of race altogether. Whiteness operates as the non-racial position – or non-position – against which "race," as black, brown, Native, and so on, come into existence and into view.[71] As such, Georgy Yancy writes, "whiteness as a racial marker [is] the 'great unsaid'" that, under the western dualist frame that Derrida also explores, occupies the transcendent universality of immaterial, disembodied mind, in contrast to the particularity of irrational, material bodiliness occupied by all forms of non-whiteness.[72] Whiteness does not name itself racially, therefore, because to do so would mean that "whiteness becomes simply one more element in a system of differences as opposed to the transcendental norm or that site from which racial differences are established and identified,"[73] thereby threatening the basis of its supremacy. Freed from the limits of racial particularity, and indeed of time and space, whiteness takes on an "inestimable value"[74] – or at least so it seems.

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[67] Derrida, "Response to Étienne Balibar."

[68] Ibid. Derrida is referring to Schmitt's famous line, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts … ." Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36. See also: Derrida, "But, beyond … ," where he insists that "the history of apartheid … would have been impossible … without Judeo-Christian ideology … " (74).

[69] Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 1.

[70] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 25.

[71] Cf. Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, 82–96.

[72] Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 49. Cf. Birt, "Bad Faith of Whiteness"; and Floyd-Thomas, "Plato on Reason." I use the term "non-whiteness" here not to collapse specific racial identities into one monolithic whole, but to acknowledge the

Transcending visibility, conceptual categorization, particularity, and materiality, whiteness resembles aspects of the classical Christian theological understanding of God as absolute, world-transcending difference.[75] As a phantasm, however – an "*as if* … that tries always to pass itself off as an *as so* or *as such*"[76] – whiteness's aspiration to divine power is ultimately just that: an aspiration. For Derrida, phantasm only "seems" to do what it sets out to do, without actually doing so, because phantasms are ultimately unreal.[77] And yet, making the unreal seem real is precisely why phantasms like whiteness are so powerful, and thus so dangerous. Despite imbuing itself with moral value and imitating aspects of divine power, the "transcendence" of whiteness, in contrast to classical Christian understandings of God's transcendence, does not enable life-giving, humanity-embracing relation, but is rather what Robert Birt calls "exclusive transcendence."[78] Theorizing an existentialist philosophical anthropology in which humans are understood to exist authentically only when they accept both their transcendence *and* their facticity, Birt shows how whiteness exemplifies "bad faith" self-deception that seeks to escape the facticity of existence precisely by denying transcendence to others. Whiteness as a form of exclusive transcendence, Birt writes,

> can live as such only through the denial of the transcendence of an Other, the reduction of that Other to an object, to pure facticity. At least in America, that Other has been primarily the black. Whiteness could not exist without that Other.[79]

Whiteness, in other words, is a force produced by the misguided aspiration to transcend and master the world by holding its non-white others in the captivity of facticity, a captivity that takes many forms, including carceral ones.

To further elaborate on Birt's argument, we might consider how the transcendent aspiration of whiteness expresses the desire not just to escape facticity but to maintain a godlike invulnerability to worldly precarity altogether – to govern the world from beyond the vulnerabilities of the world. In more explicitly theological terms, the idea of divine invulnerability rests on the doctrines of divine impassibility and aseity. The doctrine of divine impassibility holds that God is not affected by (i.e., does not suffer as a result of) anything outside God, and the doctrine of aseity holds that God does not derive causally from and is not sustained by anything outside God, meaning God is

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way in which whiteness is the founding principle that invents and empowers itself by setting itself over against what it is not. "Non-whiteness" serves as a functional descriptor of this process, and thus is a term that is in fact more about whiteness than about black, brown, and other non-white subject positions.

[73] Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 46.

[74] Derrida, "White Mythology," 210. See footnote 58 above.

[75] As Kathryn Tanner writes, God is radically transcendent in the sense that "God is not a kind of thing among other kinds of things," "a kind of being over against other kinds of beings," but is instead "beyond any such contrasts." Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 4, 11, 13.

[76] Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, 188.

[77] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 258.

[78] Birt, "Bad Faith of Whiteness," 58.

[79] Ibid.

utterly independent and self-existent.[80] Whiteness aspires to such an invulnerability in the sense that it is produced by the desire to secure itself – socially, politically, economically, and so on – against that which whiteness perceives as a threat against it, and even against basic creaturely finitude or facticity itself, enabling it to survive on itself, by itself, and for itself. The reality, however, is that whiteness only survives by extracting resources from non-white (and dispossessed white) labor and suffering, which is why its aseity, like all its other godlike attributes, can only be said to be approximate or aspirational – a pseudo-divinity. Whiteness, in other words, as a phantasm, is a power that seems by most accounts to transcend and master the vulnerabilities of finitude, sustaining itself by its own inherent resources, when the reality is that whiteness is powerful only by accumulating others' resources through acts of dispossession,[81] the evidence of which it subsequently erases from its history. In so doing, whiteness, Derrida helps us perceive, makes the power it does possess seem natural and original, as though it always has been and therefore always should be.[82] As James Baldwin writes, the "false identity" that is whiteness requires the subjugation of black people for its own safety and survival. The result of "so genocidal a lie" is that whiteness has "brought humanity to the edge of oblivion." But even its safety and survival is an illusion – a phantasm: in debasing others, Baldwin writes, whiteness debases even itself.[83] This desire for absolute and exclusive security and power – obtained at the cost of others' security and power – is also seen in the way whiteness takes the form of what Cheryl Harris identifies as a kind of "property" that provides political, economic, and bodily securities not available to non-white persons, and against which non-white persons inevitably register as modes of "trespass" that legitimate carceral intervention.[84]

It is carceral intervention, finally, that rounds out this analysis of the way of whiteness in the world. Just as it is impossible, according to Derrida, to speak of the death penalty without also speaking of religion, so it is also impossible to understand whiteness without attending not only to religion but to the carcerality that structures US society in fundamental ways. As we see from the above, whiteness is the godlike power to arrange the world according to its supremacy and to make and devalue subjects as the counterweight of its own transcendent power.[85] "The valorizing of whiteness," Birt writes, "entails the devaluation of blackness."[86] Prime among the mechanisms by which whiteness devalues and manages blackness is carcerality, which is to say captivity. "Carcerality" is a term that signifies enclosure, and so encompasses captivity in multiple forms, including slavery, the mechanisms of economic dispossession, and incarceration, making it a useful term for attending to the way the dialectic of enclosure and freedom undergirds US society. US society is a "carceral society," then, in the sense that it was legally, politically, economically, and infrastructurally forged by way of slavery, and that its ongoing central organizing principles of race and capital (as well as normativities of gender and sexuality) depend upon the post-slavery carceralities of dispossession, criminalization, and incarceration for their continued survival and maintenance.[87]

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[80] See: Milbank, "Immutability/Impassibility, Divine"; and Viola, "Aseitas."

[81] For more on the notion of "accumulation by dispossession," see: Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.

[82] See above. Derrida, "White Mythology."

[83] James Baldwin, "On Being White … ," 166–70.

[84] Harris, "Whiteness as Property." My dissertation, "White Property, Black Trespass: A Theological-Political Account of Criminalization," further explores the theological dimensions of how whiteness as a form of property creates the conditions for the criminalization of black and economically dispossessed communities.

[85] While whiteness does make and devalue subjects as the counterweight of its own power, the subjects it "makes" have also engaged for centuries in acts of resistant self-making and remaking. For one theological account that highlights the religious dimensions of black self-determination and resistance to enslavement and racial capitalism, see Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 107–54.

[86] Birt, "Bad Faith of Whiteness," 61–2.

The tools of whiteness are carceral tools – mechanisms of captivity and containment – because whiteness is a form of security against and management of the non-white world. This is why Foucault's insights into the management of bodies and populations are crucial for understanding that whiteness *needs* US carcerality for its survival: managing forms of life that threaten whiteness in its full social, political, and economic multidimensionality requires mechanisms to keep such threats at bay,[88] which helps explain why today's American legal justice system still holds captive, surveils, and dispossesses a disproportionate number of black, brown, and economically dispossessed people.[89] As carceral theorists including Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, and Joy James have made clear,[90] the mass incarceration of black communities is a means of the maintenance of whiteness, which is to say the maintenance of black subjugation as a continuation "by another name"[91] of prior carceral forms, including slavery. As Davis shows, the thirteenth amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, "except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted," legally justifies the effective re-enslavement of black people by other means.[92] One of the first legal and economic means of carceral continuation beyond chattel slavery, Davis identifies, was the convict lease system, which "transferred symbolically significant numbers of black people from the prison of slavery to the slavery of prison."[93] Other examples of the ongoing maintenance of US carcerality despite challenges to it include the multiple plantations in the south that became penitentiaries after emancipation,[94] as well as the strike-busting and vagrancy-punishing patrols commissioned by the owning class in the north and plantation-sponsored slave patrols in the south that transformed into formal municipal police forces in the late nineteenth century.[95]

US carcerality is an instantiation of the godlike power of whiteness to arrange the world and forge subjects in the sense that, both historically and today, it institutes mechanisms that manage bodies and life in order to maintain a social, political, and economic order designed to secure whiteness and related normativities (including especially of gender and sexuality) from what threaten it. To put it as concisely as possible, if whiteness orders a world, the world it orders is necessarily a carceral one. Such a capacity constitutes a theologico-political power, again, both for the reason that theological rationales make whiteness possible, and because in terms of its material function in the world, it mimics or approximates aspects of divine power in ways that transform people's existence fundamentally. Whiteness might be understood as a mode of theologico-political "transcendence," then, in the sense that it is the power to govern the world, invisibly, from *beyond* the world's vulnerabilities, and secures its (social, political, and economic) power by deploying the carceral as a means of managing non-white life, and of "making" and "letting" non-white peoples die. In this way, like the sovereign "beyond" of Derrida's theologico-political death penalty, whiteness is a power over life and death. And yet, isolatable sovereign "decision" on life and death does not adequately account for the scope of its power.[96] As Foucault helps us see, sovereignty becomes "racist" by circulating beyond the subject-to-subject order of sovereignty, managing bodies and life not merely by letting live (pardon) and making die (execution), but by *making* live and *letting* die in all manner of ways.[97]

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[87] While this essay focuses primarily on the vectors of race and class, gender and sexuality are necessary components of a full grasp of carcerality and US society in all its dimensions. See: Davis, *Women, Race & Class*; Barrie and Broomhall, *Police and Masculinities*; Kaba et al., "No Selves to Defend"; Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; and Armour, *Signs & Wonders*.

[88] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*; and Foucault, *The Punitive Society*.

[89] Prison Policy Initiative and Wagner and Rabuy, "Mass Incarceration: 2017."

[90] See: Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*; Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*; and James, "Introduction: Democracy and Captivity."

[91] Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*.

[92] Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 28–9.

[93] Quoted in James, "Introduction: Democracy and Captivity," xxi.

[94] The Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola Prison) and Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman Farm) are two of numerous examples.

[95] See: Hadden, *Slave Patrols*; and Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue*.

As Derrida himself seems to perceive through his consideration of the metaphysical weight of the guillotine that is "no one" and the transcendent "absence" of the power that manifests through the telephone to the beyond,[98] power does not act exclusively through the clearly identifiable agency of *a* sovereign; rather, power "circulates," as Foucault likes to say, which means it cannot be circumscribed by reference to any single site of agency alone.[99] What sovereignty and subsequent forms of power hold in common is the power to decide who constitutes a threat to order and who does not, and to mark out the boundaries of life and death accordingly. With whiteness, however, power does not necessarily reside exclusively with the governor or president who "decides" on life and death, but with mechanisms and policies that so "decide" by ordering the world in a way that determines proximity to life and death for populations conceived racially. Whiteness "orders" US carcerality, then, in the sense that it does not just punish actions but manages "abnormal" forms of life understood to be essentially tethered to disruptive (criminal) dispositions by arranging the world in a way that incorporates this management into its structure, so that "decision" takes place as part of the (white) world's operating.

Derrida argues that sovereignty is the hyphen connecting the theological to the political in service of the death penalty. But if carceral death penalties encompass more than capital punishment, and if carcerality consists in power complexified beyond strictly sovereign configurations, then a sovereign frame is limited in what it can tell us about the character of US carcerality. In order to widen Derrida's fruitful theorization of the "theologico-political" – including through elaboration upon and extension of Derrida's own work on race and phantasm – I argue that whiteness, rather than sovereignty, should be understood to constitute the hyphen connecting the theological to the political in service of today's carceral death penalties broadly conceived, because whiteness both comes to be via theologico-political reasoning, on the one hand, and concretely mimics and approximates godlike power by arranging the world carcerally according to its supremacy, on the other. Derrida posits in the last lecture of the first volume of his death penalty seminars that "even when it will have been abolished, the death penalty will survive; it will have other lives in front of it, and other lives to sink its teeth into."[100] Likewise, whiteness, even when it seems to have disappeared as a determining factor in contemporary life, persists, taking on new forms that take hold of and manage non-white (and dispossessed white) life in a multitude of ways, requiring ever new forms of resistance.[101] If there is to be any abolition of death penalties "worthy of the name," as Derrida puts it, it will include the abolition of the whiteness that orders a world that both "makes" and "lets" non-white and dispossessed peoples die.[102]

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[96] Though capital punishment is indeed inflicted predominantly on non-white and economically dispossessed people.

[97] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 256.

[98] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 62–3, 139–45.

[99] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 29. This does not of course mean that whiteness cannot also be located in particular identifiable agencies. The point is that whiteness is not *exclusively* locatable in such a way.

[100] Derrida, *Death Penalty*, Vol. I, 282–3.

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[101] See: Roediger, *How Race Survived*.

[102] See: Guenther, "An Abolitionism Worthy."

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