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B O D Y

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demanding that total risk of excavating the terrible depths of the worlds into which we've been born, the ones we did not choose, the ones that have given birth to *us*. Through Baldwin's lens, neither the good ship *Jesus* nor Dr. Schultz's progressive white identity will do. Both are fundamentally unhelpful because both capture the world at the center of their speech. Both distract us from Baldwin's intransigent slave, the eternal figure who appears in order to tell the truth, vomits the anguish up, and is crucified. Neither the good ship *Jesus* nor the bourgeois white progressive can hear God's word resounding from the slave ship's hold.

Baldwin thus turns us away from a Christianity of the slave ship, where whiteness transforms a dark-skinned Hebrew into a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white Jesus. Baldwin's struggle to articulate freedom from the world's underbelly turns us toward the "disreputable Hebrew criminal, crucified between two thieves."²⁵ That is, Baldwin turns us toward the deepest horror of death, the part of our own personal excavation where we find ourselves at Golgotha: God's life suspended at the break between the last word of an old history and the first word of a new one. As we face the unrelenting master/slave framework, Baldwin's intransigent slave calls us to begin at the only place to begin: the end of the world.²⁶

25. Baldwin, "White Racism or Christian Community," in *The Price of the Ticket*, 437.

26. This echoes the Martinique poet and theorist of negritude Aime Césaire and his important work, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001). In the face of the colonial world, he writes, "What can I do? One must begin somewhere. Begin what? The only thing in the world worth beginning: The End of the World of course" (27).

7 Soulful Resistance: Theological Body Knowledge on Tennessee's Death Row

by ANDREW KRINKS

IN HIS SEARCH FOR the truth beyond all doubt, the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes posited that the fundamental source and constitution of human personhood is the thinking mind, not the body: *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am. Descartes argued that "I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it."¹ But bodies, too, are fundamental to personhood. Indeed, bodies, in all their materiality, are indispensable sites of knowledge, meaning that knowing is and can only be a thoroughly embodied activity: *what* and *how* one knows are inseparable from the concrete, material, and relational dynamics of one's lived reality and context. To be human might be to *think* or to *know*, but one cannot *know* without a body. Thus, to be human is to be embodied.

And yet, for people living in especially fragmented and fragmenting material contexts, such as Tennessee's death row, embodiment is often much more complicated. To be embodied on death row is to be thoroughly delimited—materially, spatially, and relationally—under another's control, destined for death strapped to a gurney. As a result, men here have few options but to center their subjectivity beyond the purely material: to be human inside a death machine demands being more than just a body; it demands soulfulness. To understand what it means to be human on Tennessee's

1. Quoted in Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 4.

death row, we must look at the material and relational nature of life on death row, the theological frameworks that guide life there, and, finally, the soulful resistance that rehumanizes life in this dehumanizing environment.²

THE MATERIALITY OF DEATH ROW

Over the course of multiple visits throughout 2012 and 2013, I conversed with five prisoners facing death sentences at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee. "Paul," a forty-five-year-old black male, was twenty when he first entered prison; "Dan," a sixty-one-year-old white male was thirty-three; "Kurt," a forty-three-year-old black male, was twenty-six; "Jacob," a thirty-eight-year-old black male, was twenty-four; and "Thomas," a fifty-year-old white male, was twenty-one.³ During my first two visits, I engaged my interviewees on a range of subjects regarding their bodily experience of everyday life on death row, as well as the theological frameworks by which they make sense of their world. On my third visit, I gave each of my interviewees a previous draft of this essay and asked them to read it so that they might see how I translated, synthesized, and interpreted their stories and perspectives. On my fourth visit, we gathered around a table and talked about the essay; my interviewees critiqued, refined, and finally affirmed the content of the essay, resulting in the present version.

Located among beautiful rolling hills and inside a major bend in the Cumberland River nine miles west of downtown Nashville, Riverbend sits on 132 acres of land categorized by the Davidson County Metro Planning Department as both a

2. My operative assumption undergirding this essay is that the US prison system and the institution of capital punishment are fundamentally unjust and broken beyond repair and therefore must ultimately be abolished and replaced by more restorative and transformative forms of justice and accountability. However, I do not explicitly consider the many dimensions of the US criminal justice system, the alleged crimes of my interviewees, or the tragic impact that those crimes may have upon their victims and their families and communities. Instead, I focus on the material, spatial, relational, and theological realities that constitute everyday life inside the walls of Tennessee's death row, all in order to consider what selfhood and resistance in one dehumanizing environment looks like. For two helpful critiques of the US prison system, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: New Press, 2012); and Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, NY: Seven Stories, 2003).

3. The feedback and perspectives offered by my five interviewees represent only a small cross-section of the seventy-five or so death row prisoners at Riverbend and are not necessarily representative of all persons on Tennessee's death row. From my interactions with a number of others facing death sentences in Tennessee, however, I would posit that, while others may articulate their experiences and perspectives differently, there are parallels in the ways these men experience life on death row. Note also that I have opted to use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my interviewees. However, my interviewees requested that it be noted that they stand behind all that they have said as recorded in this essay, and that it is my choice, not theirs, to use pseudonyms. One additional note: I had interacted with three of these five interviewees previously during unrelated gatherings on death row. I also exchanged a series of letters with one of the interviewees.

floodplain and an industrial area.⁴ Inside Riverbend, death row is referred to euphemistically as "Unit 2," the literal name of the building in which death row inmates are housed. From the main entry point of the prison, where I removed my shoes, emptied my pockets, walked through a screening device, and was patted down by an officer, I passed through ten heavy steel or razor-wire-fence doors to reach the center of Unit 2, and then I passed through four more such doors to reach the room in which I conducted my interviews.⁵ All of the doors are observed through surveillance cameras and can only be unlocked (a loud buzzing sound that lasts about two seconds signals that they are unlocked) by an unseen operator.

Each of my interviewees is classified under security level A, which means they are subject to the lightest level of restraint on Unit 2. Whereas prisoners from level A are allowed outside their cells for up to eight hours a day without escort by a guard, prisoners on level B are allowed outside their cells for only one and a half hours a day. Unlike the prisoners from level A, prisoners on level B are handcuffed upon exiting their cells and are escorted by one officer at all times. Prisoners on level C are the most isolated on Unit 2, with only one hour a day outside their cells; during this time their hands and feet are shackled, and they are escorted by two officers at all times.⁶

While cells in each pod feature slight variations, nearly every cell on Unit 2 is about eight feet by ten feet wide and eight feet tall. The cells have concrete floors and walls and a tall but narrow window (about five inches wide) looking onto the outside grounds. Cells are equipped with a steel-framed bed, a single mattress, a stainless steel toilet and sink, a painted steel shelf and desk, and a small mirror. A heavy steel door bears a four-inch-wide window and an additional narrow opening through which inmates receive food and can have their handcuffs removed. Inmates are allowed a limited number of belongings inside their cells, including books, an alarm clock, notepads, letters, photographs, and so on. Every prisoner on Unit 2 is given, at minimum, four identical T-shirt tops (white, with each prisoner's number in small type on the front), four identical bottoms (white denim, with "Tennessee Department of Corrections" written down the pant leg), and a denim jacket with the same words and numbers. There is, nearly without exception, no clothing that a

4. For more information on Riverbend, see <http://www.tn.gov/correction/institutions/rmsi.html>. Riverbend is located within one mile of, among other industrial company headquarters, Advanced Plastics, Aramark Uniform Services, Choice Food Distributors, American Paper & Twine, and Material Handling Resources. That approximately seven hundred men are warehoused in an industrial area surely says something about how the prison perceives both the men it confines and the function it fulfills.

5. I met with interviewees in an open library area in which inmates spend some amount of time during the day engaging in art projects or taking classes offered by the prison or outside volunteers. A guard was stationed above this area in an upper-level observation.

6. All male prisoners sentenced to death in Tennessee are first placed on level C for eighteen months. Then, if they receive no write-ups, they are placed on level B for one year. After a year, if they have still avoided receiving any write-ups, they are placed on level A.

prisoner wears that is not issued by the prison. In the small amount of time that each death row prisoner has outside his cell each day, he has the option to exercise in a designated area that is closed in on all sides by layers of razor wire and fencing—what one interviewee called a “large cage.”

Inmates eat three meals a day. According to my interviewees, meals on Unit 2 are conducted as follows: every other day, inmates eat breakfast (around 6:30 a.m.) together in an eating area; on opposite days, inmates eat alone in their individual cells. Every single lunch (around 11:30 a.m.) is eaten alone in one’s cell. And dinner (around 4:30 p.m.), like breakfast, is eaten one day together as a group and the next alone in one’s cell.

Like those living on the outside, life on Unit 2 often includes bouts with illness. Regarding health care on death row, Paul said, “Sometimes you have to be persistent—you gotta follow up if you wanna be heard.” Jacob described health care on death row with one word: “Tylenol.” Three of the five men I interviewed have undergone surgery since they’ve been on Unit 2, and for each of them, the experience was much the same: after a long, drawn-out scheduling process, departure for surgery occurred without warning. It included waiting in various cells for hours on end before finally being transported, with officers following behind in a separate vehicle, to a hospital. My interviewees were then shackled to the bed during surgery, with officers standing guard inside and outside the room throughout.

When I asked my interviewees to reflect generally upon their relationship to their material surroundings on death row, Dan, who has been incarcerated for twenty-eight years, said immediately, “Whenever my feet hit the floor, they hit concrete.” Dan’s response provoked nods from the other interviewees present, and it reminded Kurt that he—and every other prisoner on Unit 2—has not felt grass under his feet since he first arrived, which in his case was seventeen years ago. With the exception of the glass in their small windows and the wooden tables in the open area in which we met, my interviewees said that the materials they touch and are surrounded by are made of either concrete or steel. As Thomas, who has been incarcerated for twenty-nine years, put it, “Everything is cold, hard, and flat. Everything is sterile. There’s no personality.” I asked my interviewees if they ever, under any circumstance, stand beneath an open sky; the answer was a resounding and immediate “no.”

Clearly, life on Unit 2 is characterized by significant material, spatial, and temporal delimitations. What philosophical sense might we make of human embodiment

7. I recorded my interviews using a notebook and pen. Direct quotations in this essay thus represent accurate records of my interviewees’ responses, though they are not necessarily verbatim. I have opted to represent the speech of my interviewees as closely as possible by using nonstandard spellings. All quotations from inmates on Unit 2 from this point forward in the essay come from one of four sessions conducted over the course of 2012 and 2013. All my interviewees have read and confirmed the accuracy of the quotations.

under such extreme enclosure? In his book *The Meaning of the Body*, philosopher Mark Johnson seeks to reconceive the body, in its encounter with the world, as the fundamental site of the process of “human meaning-making.” Integrating cognitive science and phenomenological analysis, his thesis is that “what we call ‘mind’ and what we call ‘body’ are not two things, but rather aspects of one organic process.” As such, Johnson attempts to develop what he calls an “embodied theory of meaning” in which meaning itself arises most essentially in relationship with one’s surroundings. Johnson argues that meaning-making is so constant a process (because we are always in an environment that shapes us in one way or another) that we are seldom even aware it is going on. For Johnson, then, this means that, in order to discern the material sources of meaning, we must look to our “mostly nonconscious bodily encounters with our world.”⁸ This leads him to hone in upon the significance of movement as a fundamental site of meaning, and he quotes Maxine Sheets-Johnstone to illustrate his argument: “*We literally discover ourselves in movement.*”⁹ The selves we discover in movement, Johnson argues, are fundamentally *situated* selves—selves whose movements are made meaningful in relation to the particular world within which they move. Thus, for Johnson, not only does a body “know” by becoming muscularly attuned to the material and spatial contours of its environment, but our sense of self-in-the-world forms out of our engagement with our material context, too.¹⁰

For the twentieth-century phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as for Johnson after him, human personhood is constituted not by the disembodied thinking self, as Descartes posited, but by one’s concrete, bodily, situatedness. As he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “to be a body is to be tied to a certain world, and our body is not primarily in space, but is rather of space. . . . The spatiality of the body is the deployment of its being as a body, and the manner in which it is actualized as a body.”¹¹ In other words, a body—and a subject—only exists in and through the spatial contours of the material context through which it moves.

If it is true that meaning-making takes place most fundamentally through a body’s interaction with its particular environment, then what sort of meaning is made and what sort of knowledge is acquired by a body confined for years on end by concrete, steel, and razor wire? And if it is true that one “discovers” oneself in movement, then what do persons whose movement is limited to an eight-by-ten-foot cell for sixteen to twenty-three hours a day discover? And if a body is not merely *in*

8. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007) xi, 1, 10, and 17.

9. Quoted in Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 20; italics original.

10. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 20–27.

11. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012) 149–50.

space, but is, more fundamentally, *of* space, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, then what sort of body is constituted by a world where “everything is cold, hard, and flat,” where one does not feel grass under one’s feet or stand under an open sky for decades, where one is thoroughly enclosed, waiting to be killed by the state? What, in short, does a nondualistic embodiment look like when one’s body is always already outside one’s control, limited by rules and procedures and architecture that are constructed entirely for the purpose of closing one off from the outside world and from the possibility of any other future at all?

Following Johnson’s and Merleau-Ponty’s insights, we might posit that material conditions like those of Unit 2, which so severely fragment the spaces humans need to be fully human, are conditions that risk fragmenting personhood itself. If human personhood is constituted in part by the material spaces through which it moves, then to so thoroughly constrict a person’s space risks constricting his or her capacity for fully integrated, nonfragmented experience and expression. It is in this sense that prison may be understood as essentially *dehumanizing*.

RELATIONALITY ON DEATH ROW

In terms of their relations with others, it quickly became clear from our interactions that human touch is very important for many of the men on Unit 2. When I entered the room where our first set of interviews would take place, the three men I knew previously and the two who I met for the first time all extended their hands for a handshake that turned into an embrace with the other arm. When I asked them about the extent and nature of physical contact for prisoners on death row, Dan responded, “Not everybody embraces around here, but most of us do. You can’t force it on anyone, but for those who do embrace, it creates communal harmony.” Likewise, Paul said, “Hugs bring about fellowship. It’s more than just coexistence—it’s brotherhood. Our love is unconditional.”

When it comes to the nature of relations between Unit 2 prisoners and guards, Kurt said, “Well, you definitely can’t hug officers—no matter what. You *can* shake hands though—and we do with lots of them.” Dan added that “some officers don’t allow any positive interaction whatsoever,” and Kurt responded again: “Yeah, some officers think they have to be tough, but later they let their guard down, relax. Some of ‘em even like to come to Unit 2 now.” When I asked my interviewees about any other times touch occurs between guards and prisoners, they raised the issue of frisks and strip searches. Paul says that frisk searches happen multiple times every day, including every time they exit and enter their cells, whereas full strip searches occur when they leave the prison for surgery or court or when they visit with outsiders. For most of my interviewees, these kinds of searches are simply a part of life on Unit 2,

which means it is better to get used to them than to physically resist them. As Dan put it, “You have to get acclimated to searches. You have no choice. It’s up to you to make the best of the situation you’re in.”

Finally, I asked my interviewees about physical touch with “outsiders,” meaning family and others who come to Unit 2 to spend time in the visiting room. Unlike time that is spent with other prisoners on Unit 2, time spent with outsiders is closely monitored. Prisoners are allowed to meet with visitors in the same room, but at least one guard stands at the edge of the room throughout the entirety of each visit. Dan also says that outsiders and insiders can hug, but only when they arrive and when they depart from one another. Throughout each visit, insiders and outsiders can hold hands, and sometimes, depending on the guard, a prisoner can even keep an arm around his visitor’s shoulder.

After inquiring about my interviewees’ relationships with both their material surroundings and other human beings on Unit 2, I asked them to consider the aggregate message these material and relational realities communicate to their physical bodies—*What does this institution want you to know in your body? How does it tell you? How do you hear it?* Dan responded first: “They want me to know that they have this body.” After prodding him further to get at *how* the institution communicates this message, Dan said, “I have to walk through eight locked doors to get from here [open gathering room] to my cell.” Kurt echoed Dan’s response: “*They* tell you when you can do everything.” And Paul added a similar perspective: “What they tell [my body] is ‘control.’ They tell me how long I can visit with my family and how often.”

As Johnson and Merleau-Ponty argue, relation to one’s material environment is only one part of the constitution of a self. Relationality—intersubjectivity—with human others is also constitutive of a bodied self in the world. As Johnson suggests, humans, at their deepest level, are not “solitary” creatures.¹² And yet, life on death row is very much a solitary existence, and as such, it has the potential to disassemble the subjectivity of subjects that are fully human only through relation to others. Philosopher Lisa Guenther argues in her book *Solitary Confinement* that the practice of solitary confinement constitutes a form of living death. She writes:

Solitary confinement works by turning prisoners’ constitutive relationality against themselves, turning their own capacities to feel, perceive, and relate to others in a meaningful world into instruments of their own undoing. This self-betrayal is only possible for beings who are complicated, whose subjectivity is not merely a point but a hinge, a self-relation that cannot be sustained in absolute solitude, but only in relation to others.¹³

12. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 51.

13. Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) xiii. It should be noted that, technically speaking, *solitary confinement* is a term that applies, on Tennessee’s death row, to the men on security levels B and C who spend between

As Dan summarized at one point during our conversation, “Metal doors and walls enhance mental instability . . . these cells close in on some of these guys,” meaning that it is all too easy, when one is so thoroughly cut off from others and from the outside world, to eventually become cut off from oneself.

Indeed, according to Guenther, the spatial design of the contemporary super-max prison fragments meaning and often precludes the possibility of a healthy, fully formed subjectivity: “The space of the supermax is structured in a way that tends to exhaust a meaningful sense of space; it pushes experience to the point of collapse. Stuck in the same routine, within the same rigid walls, one’s own corporeal and intercorporeal Being-in-the-world risks being evacuated as a site of mattering and care.”¹⁴ Concretizing the perspectives of Johnson and Merleau-Ponty, Guenther thus suggests that an environment which deprives fundamentally relational and spatial beings of both relation and space is an environment that forces a kind of “living death”—a fact doubly onerous for people already destined for execution by the state.¹⁵ For my interviewees, while some human touch occurs in day-to-day life on death row, it is nevertheless a severely limited tactile relationality. And while prisoners on Unit 2 have the freedom to relate to one another through embrace and have the ability to show some mutuality with guards through the shaking of hands, guards also have the right to touch prisoners at any given time in thoroughly dehumanizing ways. Thus, as creatures who are constituted as persons only through meaningful, mutual relation and touch with other humans, an environment that both limits mutual touch and imposes unwelcomed touch significantly challenges one’s ability to keep a sense of self—both body and mind—integrated and intact.

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY ON DEATH ROW

Because particular conceptions of the body and the soul have long been encoded in the development of the prison system, and because on death row one’s body is always already outside one’s control, I also asked my interviewees about the theological concepts that guide their own understandings of the body, the soul, and the relationship between the two. On the question of the body, Paul spoke up first, and his answer was met with instantaneous and conclusive agreement: “The body is the temple of God.” On the subject of the soul (or the mind or the spirit),¹⁶ my

twenty-two and a half and twenty-three hours a day in their cell. The men I interviewed, each of whom is classified under level A, spend up to eight hours outside their cells every day; thus, they are not technically under solitary confinement. Nevertheless, sixteen or more hours a day in a small cell most certainly constitutes a *solitary* existence, relatively speaking.

14. *Ibid.*, 194.

15. *Ibid.*, xi–xxx, 3–22.

16. While I recognize there are important historical, philosophical, and theological differences

interviewees had significantly more to say. Paul responded, “The spirit is a traveling vehicle—not bound by the laws of man.” Dan said that “the spirit is God breathing the breath of life into you. It’s the living, breathing part of you.”

When I asked my interviewees about the *relation* between the body and the soul, their views became more complicated. “The body is an enemy to my spirit,” Paul said. “The body is where depression, low self-esteem, hopelessness happens. You have to crucify—you have to kill the body so the soul can be free from the bondage of earth and man.” Kurt resonated with this perspective: “My soul battles with my body. I have to take charge, tell my body ‘no.’” When I asked if the soul, then, has preeminence over the body, my respondents answered that it does. Dan refined the others’ perspective slightly by referencing Ephesians 6:12: “Our battle is against sin, though, not flesh.” Likewise, Thomas said that “the Holy Spirit lives within me—in my body.”

After asking my interviewees about their views on the body and the soul, I asked them to ponder how the prison itself might view the body and the soul. On the prison’s views of the body, Paul said, “For them, it’s a piece of property. It belongs to them—you’re a number.” Dan substantiated Paul’s claim with an example: “The state will literally write you up if you mutilate your body. Because it’s their property, and you can’t mutilate their property.” When asked if the prison has any notion of the prisoner’s soul, they each thought for a moment and then together agreed that the prison does not take into consideration the spiritual souls of its inmates.¹⁷

Theologian Colleen Griffith points to the complexity of Western Christian thought on human bodies: “Throughout the tradition, diverse judgments have existed concerning the meaning of the body and its function. Bodies have been revered and held suspect, problematized and anathematized.”¹⁸ As Griffith suggests, one prominent view of the relationship between the body and the soul in Christian thought has been that of “hierarchical ordering.” Exemplified most in the writings of Augustine, this view holds that the right relationship between the body and the soul is one of “domination.” As Griffith summarizes, because, according to Augustine, the

between soul, spirit, and mind, for the purposes of this essay, I felt it most amenable to the interview process to simply allow them to function interchangeably as signifiers of an individual’s interiority, as it seems they do in the general, colloquial religious-speak employed by my interviewees.

17. For Michel Foucault’s notion of the prisoner’s “soul” as a kind of byproduct of the prison’s disciplinary power over bodies, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Vintage, 1995) 3–31. Although Foucault’s text is essential reading on this subject, I would argue that by conceptualizing the creation and function of what he calls the prisoner’s soul in strictly negative terms, Foucault forecloses upon the opportunity to ascertain in the interior soul space of the prisoner—even if produced, as it were, through the prison’s totalizing power over bodies—a means of potential resistance to the subordination of the prisoner’s body, as I explore in the final section.

18. Griffith, “Spirituality and the Body,” in *Bodies of Worship: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, ed. Bruce Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999) 70. Although Augustine does not go so far as to curse the body as many gnostics and later ascetics would, even calling it “good,” he nevertheless posits the soul as the higher good in the human.

soul is of greater value than the vice-consumed body, the “soul must rule the body.” Griffith also highlights the philosophical development under Descartes of mind-body dualism. Represented most succinctly in the legendary *cogito* formulation, “I think, therefore I am,” Descartes’s thought posits the self in “pure,” disembodied knowing, thus rendering the body of secondary importance.¹⁹

Judging from my interviewees’ responses to my inquiries regarding the body and the soul, it would seem that the influences of both Augustine (from Plato) and Descartes live on. As Kurt, echoing Augustine, said, while the body is the temple of God, one ultimately has to tell the body no in order to free the soul from bondage so that it may retain its proper preeminence. Indeed, much like Descartes, Kurt locates his *I* some place separate from his body when he says that “I have to take charge, tell my body ‘no.’” As Griffith points out, such a view implies that the relation of soul to body is fundamentally one of “domination.”²⁰

It might be easy to criticize what might in another context be deemed an unhelpful and even dangerous theological and philosophical dualism that hierarchizes the body and the soul in a relationship of domination, but the material, spatial, and relational realities of life on Unit 2 make forms of mind-body dualism particularly difficult to overcome. As philosopher Drew Leder argues, mind-body dualism “resonates with and illuminates aspects of human experience,” which means that dualism can only be overcome if we first acknowledge the truth it articulates.²¹ And as the men on Unit 2 illustrate, mind-body dualism is indeed one way to *make sense* out of a particularly fragmenting material context. When one’s body is thoroughly confined both by one’s material surroundings and by the multitude of other mechanisms and guidelines that limit freedom of movement, spontaneity, and relationality, and particularly because corporeal resistance would be met with severe punishment, one is hardly able to opt for anything other than the seemingly dualistic negation of the body forced upon it by its environment. As Dan put it, “We’ve had to condition ourselves in this environment. You have to make the best of your situation.” Thus, regardless of whether an Augustinian or Cartesian concept of the relationship between the body and soul/spirit/mind is specifically and intentionally *opted* for, we might well argue that the institution of prison, at the very least, creates a condition in which its subjects have few other options for conceptualizing what is an always already dominated body. Is it possible, then, to discern in my interviewees’ dualistic theological anthropologies something beyond a merely negative byproduct of the prison’s material coercions upon the body—something, perhaps, that gives us insight

19. *Ibid.*, 71–74.

20. *Ibid.*, 71.

21. Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 155.

into what human personhood and agency in such a dehumanizing and fragmenting environment look like?

SOULFUL RESISTANCE ON DEATH ROW

Utilizing the work of Merleau-Ponty and Frantz Fanon, philosopher and theorist Gayle Salamon suggests that in situations of racial- and gender-based oppression—oppressions that are particularly inscribed on the bodies of those who experience them—bodied subjects must find means of resistance that deploy corporeality in ways that include both the *surface* of one’s body, as it were, as well as the dimensions of the body’s *interiority*. Salamon thus seeks to develop an account of “bodily being” that provides “a way of understanding the retreat into the body as a difficult but necessary achievement that paradoxically both is born of social relations and opens the way for a body and a subject to exist in the world.” For Salamon, interiority provides a final remaining space where subjects may resist the manipulation carried out upon their bodies. As she writes, “Bodily interiority . . . functions as a way to withdraw from a form of social constitution that would constitute us simply as exterior and exposed surfaces for the play of social power.”²²

Similarly, Huey Newton, a founder of the Black Panther movement, reflecting on his time in solitary confinement, writes: “In deprivation, you have to somehow replace the stimuli, provide an interior environment for yourself.” For Newton, that interior environment has the potential to become the space from which a person can acquire the means to overpower the institution that confines her or him: “when I resolved that they would not conquer my will, I became stronger than they were. I understood them better than they understood me. No longer dependent on the things of the world, I felt really free for the first time in my life.”²³ Out of his experiences in solitary confinement, Newton learned that prisons are incapable of taking into account the full dimensionality of human beings: “The prison cannot have a victory over the prisoner because those in charge . . . assume if they have the whole body in a cell that they have contained all that makes up the person. But a prisoner is not a geometrical figure, and an approach that is successful in mathematics is wholly unsuccessful when dealing with human beings.”²⁴ In other words, a human being confined by concrete, steel, and razor wire is more than the material body confined by concrete, steel, and razor wire.

22. Salamon, “‘The Place Where Life Hides Away’: Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and the Location of Bodily Being,” *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2006) 98 and 110.

23. Newton, “Freedom,” in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, David Hilliard and Donald Weise, eds. (New York, NY: Seven Stories, 2002), 3 and 4.

24. Newton, “Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?: January 3, 1970,” in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, 154.

During our conversation, Thomas articulated what I perceive to be something of the sort of subversive interiority that Salamon and Newton envision. "There's very little that remains yours in here," he said. "They have me captured. I know they want to kill me. I know these things—they're obvious. They may have me physically, but I'm never gonna let them have my mind." Similarly, Paul told me that he spends 85 percent of each and every day in a meditative state. "When I'm in that place," he said, "I'm in touch with freedom." In these ways, both Thomas and Paul demonstrate, on the one hand, the dualism that is made unavoidable in such a context and, on the other hand, the means by which such forced dualism may be deployed to resist the forced fragmentation of life.

Additionally, considering the strict time-and-space structure of every day on Unit 2, and particularly the almost certain direction in which time, for each of my interviewees, is inevitably moving (execution), I asked my interviewees how they conceive of time and the future, and the impact it has on each day. Dan said that "time passes quickly—but only if you don't think about it too much. You have to think about the quality, not the quantity, of time here. Stress affects your lifespan negatively, so it's important not to let time get to you." Kurt responded similarly, saying that "staying active makes time move more quickly. Thinking about time is like torturing yourself." As for the future, Dan said, "One day, I will leave here—either up [pointing upward] or through the front door." Kurt agreed with Dan, but only in part: "I *know* I'm going to be delivered from this place—and I mean through the front door. I know I'm going to get out. I have a life to live out there." Similarly, Paul, who has been in prison for twenty-five years, said, "God has something better for me than this. I think about it everyday. I say to my future, 'I'll be with you soon,' either on the outside or in heaven. This too shall pass."

My interviewees' descriptions of the experience of time, of the manifold material and relational delimitations of life on death row, and of their discerning interior freedom and a vision of a future somewhere outside the prison's walls, call to mind the religious frameworks through which enslaved Africans in the American diaspora discerned and obtained their own sense of freedom. In his book *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, religious ethicist Riggins Earl Jr. describes the ways in which enslaved Africans used the logic and rhetoric of religious conversion, deployed first by their slave masters as a form of dehumanization, to formulate a language and framework that served to rehumanize their existence. In the stories, songs, and symbols of slave religion that some scholars flatly characterize as merely otherworldly or "escapist," Earl perceives what he calls "element[s] of radical dissociation" in which "the convert has to be radically disengaged from the everyday world by the power of God in order to be commissioned for a radically new kind of moral engagement of it." Through a redeployment of the master's language, Earl suggests, enslaved Africans were enabled

"to make the transition from the status of being the master's property to that of being authentic members of the family of God. . . . in a world that refused to recognize them as being authentic selves," thus enabling them to rise above, to transcend, the realities of dehumanization.²⁵ Moreover, as James Cone argues, enslaved Africans' visions and hopes for a liberated, heavenly future constitute a religious posture that is more than merely "an opium of the people," as some suggest, but is rather "a radical judgment which black people are making upon the society that enslaved them."²⁶

Just as it is insufficient, as Earl, Cone, and others suggest,²⁷ to perceive in slave religion nothing more than a body- and world-denying escapism, so too it is insufficient to perceive in the religiosity of my interviewees on Tennessee's death row nothing more than a body-denying escapism. Rather, in a context of extreme delimitation and confinement, seemingly simple acts and gestures that lay hold of dignity and freedom function both as acts of self-assertion over against dehumanization and as what Cone might call a radical judgment of the structure that imprisons (enslaves) them. Moreover, in drawing a parallel between the religiosity of enslaved Africans and that of men on Tennessee's death row, I am making a connection that is more than merely abstract. As Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, and others point out, the institution of slavery, once officially abolished, resurrected itself, in part, in the creation of codes and laws that were part of the development of today's prison system.²⁸ Consider, for example, that the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, includes one significant exception: "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted," meaning that slavery has been abolished for all but the more than two million people currently confined in US prisons, including the men on Tennessee's death row.²⁹ Thus, in naming the forms of religiosity of men on Tennessee's death row as contiguous with that of enslaved Africans in the Americas, I am also naming, with Davis and others, today's prison system as an actual evolution of the institution of slavery, thereby enabling us to discern in the religiosity of my interviewees an even more significant trajectory.

25. Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 52, 65, and 52–53.

26. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 120.

27. See also Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

28. See Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, NY: Seven Stories, 2003) 22–39; Davis, "From the Convict Lease System to the Super-Max Prison," in *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons*, ed. Joy James (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2000); Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: New Press, 2012) 20–58. See also, Adam Jay Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

29. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 28–29.

When I asked my interviewees to consider what the prison communicates to their bodies, and how it communicates it, I also asked them to reflect on what *they* communicate to the institution through their bodies—*What do you want this institution to know? How do you tell it? And how does it hear it?* Instantly, Kurt tightened his body, sat forward in his chair, and pointed in the direction of the nearest wall, proclaiming with intensity, “I am not who you try to make me to be!” Respecting the space created by Kurt’s vehemence, the others quietly nodded in agreement. When I asked *how* he communicates this message, Kurt said, “I smile, shake hands, ask guards how they’re doing. I pay people respect, tell them I’m praying for them.” Paul echoed Kurt, “You tell ‘em by acting like a human, by being civil, being intelligent.” Dan added, “After a while, when they see all the hugging, and we shake their hands every day, we’re breaking down preconceived barriers.” Jacob summed it up: “The only way to deal with an uncivilized surrounding is to be civil.” Thus, for my interviewees, showing respect through physical touch, prayerfulness, and civility functions not as a mere subservient assent to the system but as a concrete means of nonviolent resistance to the power that would otherwise define them, in Thomas’s words, as mere “captured flesh.”

In the context of incarceration on death row—an environment in which one is moving perpetually toward death at the hands of the state—one is essentially left with few options but to concede, in effect, absolute control over one’s body. After all, purely physical resistance to the prison’s power will only summon more severe violence in response. And yet, despite the prison’s coercive mechanisms of power over prisoners’ corporeal, spatial, and relational existence, my interviewees demonstrate that there remain means of resisting such coercion through what they understand to be the interior dimension of the soul or the mind. This dimension is composed not only of states of meditative or mental interiority, as with Thomas and Paul, but is also embodied in the collective corporeal practices that they understand as emanating from that interior life: practices of communal embrace, shaking hands with and praying for officers, showing respect to all persons, and being dignified, intelligent human beings.

Moreover, given that my interviewees explicitly articulated a sense that the prison controls their bodies in manifold ways while not paying attention to their spiritual selves, it would also seem that they invest themselves so heavily in the interior dimension of the soul, in part, because it is perceived to be the only place the prison does not look and cannot see.³⁰ As the last bastion of freedom and dignity, the

30. Upon review of my previous draft of this essay, Kurt responded to this sentence by saying that he does not resort to states of interiority *because* the prison does not look and cannot see that part of himself; rather, he told me, he does it out of a love for God. In other words, his “resistance” doesn’t have anything, at first, to do with the prison itself; it has to do with his love of God because of what he understands God has done for him.

soul/mind/spirit thus functions powerfully as the site from which imprisoned subjects assert themselves over against the material, spatial, and relational inscriptions on the body that would seek to define them as little more than irredeemable pieces of property. And though for my interviewees such resistance may seem, in part, to *deny* the body, it nevertheless *requires* the body in order to take concrete shape through the body-based practices they employ on a daily basis, practices that serve to rehumanize an otherwise dehumanizing environment.³¹

When the body’s knowledge is formed through strict material, spatial, and relational delimitation, one has little option but to root one’s sense of self beyond a strict materiality of the body alone, seeking postures and practices, rather, that allow the body to transcend its corporeal confinement by embodying that part of oneself that cannot be contained by concrete walls, steel doors, and razor wire. And as my interviewees demonstrate, this embodiment of the transcendent aspects of one’s selfhood can serve to transform spaces that might otherwise fragment and dissolve one’s sense of self and one’s community. By cultivating and living from a deeply rooted interiority, my interviewees on Tennessee’s death row creatively and soulfully resist those mechanisms of control that would otherwise dehumanize and fragment them to the point of death—quite literally. By creatively *transcending* their subjugated immanence—in the sense of both “moving beyond” and “deploying transcendently”—they demonstrate the capacity of confined peoples to articulate and embody real freedom, even in the confines of an eight-by-ten cell.

POSTSCRIPT: ON THE CURRENT STATE OF EXECUTIONS IN TENNESSEE

The state of Tennessee executed Cecil Johnson Jr. on December 2, 2009. He was pronounced dead at 1:34 in the morning. In the months and years following Cecil’s execution, sodium thiopental, one of the ingredients comprising the three-drug protocol theretofore used for executions in the state, became unavailable. As a result, there have been no executions in Tennessee since Mr. Johnson’s four years ago. However, in late September 2013, the state announced that it had procured a new drug to carry out executions: pentobarbital, a drug typically used for euthanizing animals.

31. It is important to note that the kind of resistance I am describing is a resistance at the level of basic orientation toward one’s world, a kind of first-order resistance, which, as such, by no means exhausts what might be called resistance inside a prison. There is, for instance, the Attica Prison Rebellion of 1971, the organized resistance of Black Panthers inside prisons throughout the 1970s and up to today, the many strategic inside-outside partnerships that advocate for changes inside prisons, and the series of recent hunger strikes at Pelican Bay Prison in California. Even in Tennessee, there is the REACH Coalition, which, through what it calls “reciprocal education,” helps create collaborative opportunities for activism, learning, and creativity, including cofacilitation of a number of highly provocative and moving art exhibits organized primarily by men on Unit 2. For more on the REACH Coalition, visit <http://reachcoalition.wordpress.com>.

Tennessee, along with other states, has had trouble securing a legal supply of the drug, and so has looked to so-called compounding pharmacies in order to obtain it. Last year, Tennessee's state legislature amended a law guaranteeing that the identity of the compounding pharmacies that provide the state's supply of execution drugs will be kept a secret.

On October 3, 2013, the attorney general of the state of Tennessee requested execution dates for ten prisoners on the state's death row—almost twice as many men as the state has executed since 1976. One of those ten prisoners, “Dan,” was interviewed for this essay. When I saw Dan about two weeks after the Attorney General's request, I asked him how he was feeling. “They think they know when my life will end,” he said. “But only God knows that.” To be honest, I didn't know what to say. And I still don't. After we spoke, a group of us—men on death row and their friends and advocates—sat in a circle, held hands, and took turns praying for the death machine to be dismantled. Another friend, “Kurt,” also interviewed in this story, squeezed my hand until it turned purple as he near-shouted in prayer, within earshot of a corrections officer, imploring God to stop the state's march toward the death of men sitting among us. Soulful resistance, you might say. And though I didn't—and still don't—know what to say, I too raised my voice, petitioning the God of life to bring life where death pervades. A feeble word, perhaps, but what else did I have in that moment? Having seen and heard and touched the depth of humanity and dignity and love embodied by men on Unit 2, and having been seen and addressed and embraced by such men, and being convinced that God does not desire that people made in God's own image should die—even for inflicting great harm upon others—if I close my eyes, as if in prayer, I can imagine a power like the power embodied in Kurt's grip (which almost matches that of his hug) welling up like the mighty waters the prophet Amos imagined to flatten that institution which thinks it carries out justice when it alienates, fragments, and extinguishes life.

Extending from my prayers, and under the guidance of others more experienced in this work, I am doing what little I can to slow the state's sprint toward the death of the men on Unit 2. If they should succeed in ending Dan's life, or the life of any of the other men on Unit 2, I will be there outside the walls to bear collective witness with others, to embody my own *no* in accordance with what I understand to be God's *yes* to life, to its restoration, even in the wake of violence and death. As of the writing of this postscript, due to a legal challenge to the state's new lethal injection protocol, executions have been postponed until October 2014. To keep apprised of updates regarding the death penalty in Tennessee, visit www.tennesseedeathpenalty.org, tnsocialjustice.wordpress.com, or reachcoalition.wordpress.com.

8 Quiet Storms: The Paintings of Women by Joyce Polance

by JEN GRABARCZYK

THE FEMALE FORM IS hardly unexplored territory within the history of painting. Nevertheless, when a present-day artist with the sensibility, intuition, and tenderness of Joyce Polance approaches the canvas, the figures in the work do not breathe antiquated. These fleshly women invite us into the mystery of their stories and offer space for us to receive their unspoken pain and healing as part of our own.

Through her work, Polance vulnerably yet confrontationally depicts the emotional curvature of women. She presents images of women as they exist in relationship with one another—as friends, lovers, mothers, sisters, soul-connectors. These glimpses tell us stories, visualizing a form of redemption. In the way her figures seem to touch and interact, she assures us that negative patterns are not the end of the story for women (or men, for that matter) who bear a challenging past. Yet even further, she professes through her work that there are those who can intercede as bodily presences of support when significant figures of the past have failed.

Polance confesses, “Personally, it was a huge surprise to learn as an adult that I could turn to other women I wasn't biologically related to for something as simple as a hug. That just wasn't something that was modeled for me. Also, this isn't meant to exclude men. Many of the women in my paintings represent father and brother figures; I believe men have the same struggles.”