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Solitary Confinement and Intersubjectivity: Social Liminality in Prison

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Introduction

Solitary confinement goes by many names: administrative segregation, segregated housing, restricted housing, and special or intensive management, just to name a few. But whatever the name, the basic principle of this confinement remains: to isolate an incarcerated person for 23 hours a day, in a small cell, with extremely limited access to constructive or communicative materials. This is the fate of around 80,000 people in the U.S. right now,¹ including children in juvenile detention.² Many might think of solitary confinement as a deafeningly silent experience, but those who have undergone it often speak to the inescapable noise: "... it's anything but quiet. You're immersed in a drone of garbled noise, other inmates' blaring TVs, distant conversations, shouted arguments. I couldn't make sense of any of it, and was left feeling twitchy and paranoid."³ This quote is not from an incarcerated person, but the director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, Rick Raemisch. Raemisch decided to spend a day in solitary, or administrative segregation, as its called in Colorado. Raemisch says that he quickly lost sense of time passing and slept fitfully. Raemisch writes: "I began to count the small holes carved in the walls. Tiny grooves made by inmates who'd chipped away at the cell as the cell chipped away at

¹ "Solitary Watch." Solitary Watch. Accessed December 8, 2019. <https://solitarywatch.org/>.

² One of the main reforms for solitary confinement is to limit its use in juvenile detention, however, only some states have passed legislation to limit or outlaw solitary confinement for minors. Source: "***Growing Up Locked Down: Youth in Solitary Confinement in Jails and Prisons Across the United States.***" American Civil Liberties Union. ACLU, November 26, 2014.

<https://www.aclu.org/report/growing-locked-down-youth-solitary-confinement-jails-and-prisons-across-united-states>³ Raemisch, Rick. "***My Night in Solitary.***" The New York Times. The New York Times, February 21, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/opinion/my-night-in-solitary.html>.

them.”⁴ He spent twenty hours in that cell, then began the work of ending long-term solitary in Colorado.⁵

Solitary confinement has been proven, again and again, to produce depression, anxiety, and psychosis. Terry Kuppers, a psychiatrist and expert on this topic, writes that, “Inmates reported nightmares, heart palpitations and ‘fear of impending nervous breakdowns.’” He pointed to research from the 1980s that found that a third of those studied had experienced “paranoia, aggressive fantasies, and impulse control problems ... In almost all instances the prisoners had not previously experienced any of these psychiatric reactions.”⁶ Regardless of one’s opinions on criminalization or the carceral system, solitary confinement should concern us all for many reasons. For one, many prisoners are released directly from solitary confinement, or “maxed out.” This could be someone who was confined for 30 days or 20 years. Secondly, the United States has the largest prison population in the world, and the highest per-capita rate of incarceration.⁷ Thus, the disciplinary practices of U.S. prisons should concern us all.

In the following paper, I will synthesize several theorists and analyze firsthand accounts of life in solitary confinement. In Lisa Guenther’s book *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, Guenther approaches solitary confinement through phenomenological philosophy, meaning that she is interested in the conscious lived experiences of those who have been subjected to this practice. I endeavor to follow in this approach, as this paper will center the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Raemisch, Rick. “*Why We Ended Long-Term Solitary Confinement in Colorado.*” The New York Times. The New York Times, October 12, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/12/opinion/solitary-confinement-colorado-prison.html>.

⁶ Raemisch, Rick. “*My Night in Solitary.*” The New York Times. The New York Times, February 21, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/opinion/my-night-in-solitary.html>.

⁷ Policy Shifts Reduce Federal Prison Population, Vera Institute of Justice, Vera Institute of Justice, Vera Institute of Justice, Vera Institute of Justice, John Howard Association of Illinois, Organisation, et al. “*United States of America.*” United States of America | World Prison Brief, January 1, 1970. <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/united-states-america>.

narratives of those who have experienced solitary. Drawing from her work, as well as that of Victor Turner and Adam Ewing, I argue that the experience of solitary confinement functions as a site of social liminality, which produces an effect of both physical and structural invisibility, thus creating an intensive form of state-sanctioned social death.

Background

There is a great deal of literature on solitary confinement that mainly argues that there is that solitary confinement has extremely harmful effects on those subjected to it. These studies use empirical and other anecdotal evidence to argue that solitary is unethical, harmful and must be abolished. The articles “Public Health and Solitary Confinement in the United States”⁸ as well as “Solitary confinement and risk of self-harm among jail inmates,”⁹ both of which were published in the American Journal of Public Health (AJPH). In “Public Health and Solitary Confinement in the United States,” Cloud et. all argue that prisons are relying on solitary confinement to punish inmates rather than working toward rehabilitative models.¹⁰ In “Solitary confinement and risk of self-harm among jail inmates,” Kaba et. all analyze medical records for approximately 245,000 incarcerations in New York State, between 2010 and 2013.¹¹ This was part of an effort to better understand what features of prison contribute to acts of self harm. The data showed the strongest association between self-harm and solitary confinement, with those subjected to solitary confinement being 6.9 times more likely to commit an act of self harm.¹²

⁸ Cloud, David H., Ernest Drucker, Angela Browne, and Jim Parsons. 2015. “*Public Health and Solitary Confinement in the United States.*” American Journal of Public Health 105 (1): 18–26. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.302205.

⁹ Kaba, Fatos, Andrea Lewis, Sarah Glowa-Kollisch, James Hadler, David Lee, Howard Alper, Daniel Selling et al. “*Solitary confinement and risk of self-harm among jail inmates.*” American Journal of Public Health 104, no. 3 (2014): 442-447.

¹⁰ Cloud et. all. “*Public Health and Solitary Confinement in the United States.*”

¹¹ Kaba. *Solitary confinement and risk of self-harm among jail inmates.*”

¹² Kaba. *Solitary confinement and risk of self-harm among jail inmates.*”

Similarly to the “Public Health” article, Kaba et. all conclude that punitive measures such as solitary confinement must be replaced with a “treatment approach.”¹³

Other work refutes the claim that solitary confinement is humane, necessary, or reformative in any way. In “Solitary confinement: Common misconceptions and emerging safe alternatives,” Alison Shames contributes to this body of arguments against solitary confinement.

¹⁴This article outlines ten misconceptions about solitary confinement and argues against each one. Shames refutes the claim that solitary confinement is humane, necessary, or reformative in any way. Instead, she uses a variety of published research from across the United States to show the negative effects of solitary on both the prisoners and the institution of the prison. She also explores the nuances of who is confined in solitary, explaining that segregation is not always a punishment, but can also be used as a method of “protecting” more vulnerable populations, such as former gang members, those with disabilities, gay or transgender people, etc.

Shames’ article helps to ground my research because the evidence used is a compelling combination of firsthand accounts and formal data. Additionally, this argument is persuasive because it is published by the Vera Institute of Justice, which is a nonprofit national research and policy institute that has focused on issues affecting incarcerated populations since the 1960s. This article identifies the effects of solitary confinement, which can be read through the lens of liminality and social death.

Theory and Methodology

In order to understand how solitary confinement affects one’s sense of personhood and identity, I will analyze firsthand accounts of solitary confinement in the United States carceral

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Shames, Alison. *Solitary confinement: Common misconceptions and emerging safe alternatives*. Vera Institute, 2015.

system through the lens of Lisa Guenther's 2013 book *Social Death and its Afterlives* and Victor Turner's 1967 essay *Betwixt and Between*. Additionally, I will be applying Adam Ewing's theory of in/visibility from the essay "*In/visibility: Solitary confinement, race, and the politics of risk management*." This theoretical lens will illustrate how solitary confinement functions as a liminal space, and a passage into the invisibility of social death.

In *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, Lisa Guenther argues that solitary confinement has a far more profound effect than assumed.¹⁵ Guenther is interested in the human quality of intersubjectivity -- her argument relies on the notion that, "it takes a whole network of interconnected obligations, both in the present and extending into the past and future, to create and sustain social personhood."¹⁶ Her approach is based on German philosopher Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness. Husserl critiques the notion of human beings as completely autonomous individuals, arguing instead that humans are, "selves among others, where those others are both encountered within the world and co-constitutive of that world's objective reality."¹⁷ This intersubjectivity is what allows humans to make sense of the world around them, to interpret their experience as "reality." It is upon this basis that Guenther argues that solitary confinement does not simply produce side effects of depression or psychosis, but rather is affecting people on the most fundamental level, "turning the constitutive relationality of their consciousness against themselves."¹⁸

¹⁵ Guenther, Lisa. *Solitary Confinement: Social death and its afterlives*. (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013).

¹⁶ Guenther, Lisa. *solitary confinement: social death and its afterlives*. pp. xx.

¹⁷ Guenther, Lisa. *solitary confinement: social death and its afterlives*. pp. xxi.

¹⁸ Ibid, 35-36.

In this framework, one's connections with others and the world around them are necessary to have a "social personhood,"¹⁹ or a sense of oneself. This social subjectivity serves to "support, protect, and give meaning to one's precarious life as an individual."²⁰ Thus, to deprive an individual of those relationships brings about social death, because it denies them of their social subjectivity, and personhood. It is this lack, Guenther argues, that unhinges those in solitary confinement.

Many writers have engaged with Gunther's writing on solitary confinement. For instance, in the article "The cruel and unusual phenomenology of solitary confinement," Sean Gallagher draws upon Guenther's phenomenological approach to argue that intersubjectivity is an essential characteristic of the human experience. Using phenomenological philosophy as his basis for analysis, he also invokes the lenses of psychology and law in order to argue that solitary confinement constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. The interdisciplinary nature of this article makes Gallagher's argument compelling, because it combines the voices of psychological literature and more humanities-based arguments.

From an entirely different analytical framework, Victor Turner illustrates the characteristics of the liminal stage. Basing his theory on Arnold Van Gennep's 1909 book: *Les Rites de Passage*, Gennep argues that rites of passage are dependent on one's separation from their social group and reincorporation back into the group with a new social standing, or status. In order to be reincorporated, one must undergo a period of liminality.²¹ It is this liminal period, outside of one's social group, that facilitates one's re-entry and subsequent

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, xx.

²¹ Burgess, Ernest Watson. "*Les rites de passage. By Arnold Van Gennep*" *The American Journal of Sociology* Volume, 15. (1910). 707.

reincorporation into their social group. Solitary confinement, I argue, constitutes a site of social liminality which facilitates one's entry into social death.

Turner was interested in the liminal period itself, and so he created a framework for the *liminal personae* in his 1967 essay *Betwixt and Between*.²² Turner argued that the liminal personae have: no status or ranking, and thus no possessions, a polluting quality, no social relations except that between the neophyte and the instructor, which is one of complete authority, and a quality of invisibility to the other members in their society.²³ These qualities fit well with the experience of solitary confinement, making liminality a useful lens through which to analyze the experience of prisoners in solitary.

Another important theoretical voice on this topic is Adam Ewing, who posits that solitary confinement reflects a sort of in/visibility that is characteristic of prison life. In the article "*In/visibility: Solitary confinement, race, and the politics of risk management*," Ewing utilizes this term in/visibility to speak to the way prisoners are made invisible as people, and hypervisible as criminals. Ewing argues that this in/visibility is most apparent in solitary confinement. This analysis is particularly helpful in considering solitary confinement through the lens of liminality, as one of the qualities of the *liminal personae* is invisibility.

For my primary sources, I will be using firsthand accounts of solitary confinement, including published books, YouTube videos, resources from solitarywatch.org, and excerpts from Guenther's book. By analyzing firsthand accounts, I hope to center the experiences of those who have been subjected to solitary confinement and to put their voices first.

²² Victor Turner, "*Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*," in *Symposium of New Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1964).

²³ Ibid.

Liminal Personae and Unbeing

First, I must show that solitary confinement functions as a liminal space. The conception of liminal space, explained by Gennep, and later Turner, refers to the site in which a person is both and neither. The function of a rite of passage, Gennep posits, is to allow one to re-enter society with a new social identity; person A becomes person B.²⁴ A puberty rite of passage, for instance, involves a girl, who then goes through the rite, and re-enters society as a woman. The rite of passage first involves her separation from society; the girl, person A, is removed from her social sphere. Then she enters into the liminal stage, the middle section of the rite. Lastly, she is reincorporated into society, but now, as a woman, person B. In the liminal stage, there is a question of identity — is the initiate a girl or a woman at this time? Is she somehow both? This question is what interested Victor Turner, and what led him to study and analyze the *liminal personae*.

In *Betwixt and Between*, Turner creates a framework for liminality, identifying several qualities that he argues all *liminal personae* share. The liminal personae, or neophyte, has no status or ranking, and thus no possessions. Turner writes:

A further structurally negative characteristic of transitional beings is that they have nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellow Rights over property, goods, and services inhere in positions in the political-jural structure. Since they do not occupy such positions, neophytes exercise no such rights.²⁵

This quality applies well to solitary confinement; obviously possessions are limited in confinement, but this goes even farther than many might assume. Jessica Kent, a YouTuber who

²⁴ Burgess, Ernest Watson. "*Les rites de passage. By Arnold Van Gennep*" *The American Journal of Sociology* Volume, 15. (1910). 707.

²⁵ *Betwixt and Between*. 9.

makes videos about her experience in prison, discusses just how limited her possessions were in solitary confinement: “I think a lot of people that haven’t been to prison don’t truly understand — when you get stripped of everything, even the ability to turn on the light, it messes with you.”²⁶ Every morning at 6AM, correctional officers would come in to take away her mattress.²⁷ She also discusses how anything, even approved materials, could become contraband: “If I had drawn a picture, or if I had too much mail, they would take that because it was a ‘fire hazard.’” Really, they would take anything.”²⁸ Kent’s narrative demonstrates how having no possessions and no status are interconnected — it is not just that the belongings themselves are taken away, but there is a symbolic attachment to these objects, that when taken away, tells the prisoners — you have nothing because you are nothing.

Turner argues that *liminal personae* have a polluting quality²⁹ (in the sense of Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*), which results in their separation from others. This quality also fits well with the experience of solitary confinement, as people are forcibly separated from the general population, and isolated. In fact, many prisons have a specific classification for those in confinement; in Colorado one might be “classified as an R.F.P., or ‘Removed From Population.’”³⁰

Turner also posits that *liminal personae* have no social relations except that between the neophyte and the instructor, which is one of complete authority. Prisoners in solitary are obviously barred structurally from having any social relations — that is not to say that they do

²⁶ Kent, Jessica. YouTube, December 11, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg4epUX7_Ew&t=31s. 2.45.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 3:10.

²⁹ Turner. *Betwixt and Between*.

³⁰ Raemisich, Rick. “*My Night in Solitary*.” The New York Times. The New York Times, February 21, 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/opinion/my-night-in-solitary.html>.

not form them — many prisoners in solitary form relationships with those in cells near them, speaking through the vent, or “fishing” to send notes or materials from cell to cell.³¹ However, these relationships are formed out of resistance — the prisoners are not allowed to have them. The only relationship sanctioned by solitary confinement are those minimal interactions one has with the prison guards/correctional officers. These correctional officers have absolute authority, and expect total submission from the prisoners. This authority is demonstrated in many ways. Bryan Bruton was incarcerated in Florida State Prison, where he spent 30 months in a maximum management unit. Bruton is also a youtuber, who discusses his experiences in prison, and specifically in solitary confinement. In one video, he talks about his experiences with correctional officers:

... when they come around, and when I say they I’m talking about the correctional officers, who like to come around and play little games, they like to come around and give you an empty food tray, who like to come in your cell and tear your cell to pieces, walk all over your property, if you have any pictures in there sometimes they’ll tear them up, flush them down the toilet... Worse than that, they’ll cuff people up... and they’ll come in your cell with two or three correctional officers and beat the crap out of you...³²

Bruton says that these things happen because there is nobody to see it who can step in; there are no cameras in their cells, and of course the other correctional officers will inevitably “back each other up.”³³ These types of interactions, whether they are physically violent, depriving prisoners of necessary subsistence, or disrespecting their limited belongings, help correctional officers to maintain complete authority in their relationships with their inmates.

³¹ Fishing is a term used in prisons to refer to the practice of extracting single threads, generally from bedsheets, to create “fishing lines,” through which incarcerated people can send notes and other objects between cells in a solitary confinement block.

³² Bruton, Bryan, March 12, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmy9LQvuZy0>. 2:50

³³ Ibid.

Lastly, and most importantly for this analysis, liminality renders those in solitary confinement invisible. Turner argues that *liminal personae* have a quality of invisibility to the other members in their society. He writes:

The subject of the passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’. As members of society, most of us only see what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture.³⁴

So *liminal persona* are made invisible because they are neither person A, nor person B. If our society has only taught us about person A and person B, we have no lens through which to view a person AB, or a person who is neither A nor B. Applying Adam Ewing’s notion of in/visibility, it follows that our society has not taught us how to see someone as simultaneously a criminal or a prisoner and a fully complex human being.

Physically, those in solitary confinement are isolated and thus, cannot be seen. But even this physical invisibility is often more intensive than we might assume. In another YouTube video, Bruton discusses the experience of being brought to the maximum management solitary confinement unit (Q wing) for the first time:

So we’re walking down [the wing] but ahead of me, the officer, that was walking ahead was shutting all the doors that go to the cells. So the reason they do that is, everybody who is housed on Q wing, they have no access to see other prisoners. Any time a prisoner is being escorted down the wing, they shut all the doors. And when they shut all the doors, it’s a solid steel door — it has a window flap up top, but they close the window flap. So basically, whoever’s in that cell, they cannot see out...³⁵

³⁴ Turner. *Betwixt and Between*. pp. 6.

³⁵ “How I Survived 30 Months Solitary Confinement.” *How I Survived 30 Months Solitary Confinement* (blog), October 10, 2019. Bruton, Bryan, March 12, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmy9LQvuZy0>. 11.00

This kind of intensive invisibility, though not common to all solitary confinement wards, is also not unique to this one. Eastern State penitentiary was one of the first penitentiaries, a “solitary prison,” wherein each prisoner was held in confinement. Prisoners were allowed no contact with other prisoners — they knew that there were others there, but were never able to see or hear them. The prison was to stay silent at all times, such that guards wore wool socks over their shoes as they walked through the hallways.³⁶ From the prison’s opening in 1829 until 1904, “prisoners had to wear a mask or hood whenever they were removed from their cells.”³⁷ Whether it is through correctional officers intentionally closing all doors, or forcing prisoners to wear a mask, intensive physical invisibility has been a feature of solitary confinement since its conception.

Structural invisibility can be understood through Adam Ewing’s argument that solitary confinement can render prisoners simultaneously invisible and hypervisible. In the article “*In/visibility: Solitary confinement, race, and the politics of risk management*,” Ewing utilizes the term in/visibility. His main argument is that the structure of a prison creates “fields of visibility,” through which prisoners are surveilled. They are made visible as prisoners, and thus they become “objects of investigation.” However, this constructed idea of the prisoner renders the actual person invisible:

The abstract lens through which inmates are cataloged obfuscates their personality, their complexity, their agency, their subjecthood. Inmates are stripped of the benchmarks of ‘normal’ life: family, private dwelling, profession... They dwell in what geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls ‘forgotten places.’ They are rendered invisible.³⁸

³⁶ Guenther. *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*. pp. 14.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ewing, *"In/visibility: Solitary confinement, race, and the politics of risk management."*

Ewing argues that this in/visibility is most evident in solitary confinement. It is quite difficult for us to see prisoners as human beings, because we see them as criminals. Our society has forged a distinction between the two, just the same as the person A/B example, that prevents us from seeing both at the same time.

Many prisoners in solitary confinement speak to a sense of invisibility. Pete Owen, a long-term inmate of the Control Unit in a Washington prison, 2004, stated, “For months, years on end, you’re in that little box —it comes down to no recognition of your being.”³⁹ An anonymous Arizona State Prisoner told Colin Dayan, “If they only touch you when you’re at the end of a chain, then they can’t see you as anything but a dog. Now I can’t see my face in the mirror. I’ve lost my skin. I can’t feel my mind.”⁴⁰ These individuals are experiencing the invisibility of their personhood. At the same time, they are being made hypervisible as criminals, as prisoners who belong in a little box, or as something less than human.

One salient example of such in/visibility is Billy Joel Tracy’s experience in the “Death Watch” cell in a Texas prison. Tracy is a 41-year-old man who has spent almost 19 years in solitary confinement throughout his 21 years of incarceration, including one stretch of almost thirteen straight years. Tracy received his sentence to die by lethal injection in November 2017. He was taken to the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, where he is currently living out the rest of his time in solitary confinement, on Death Row. Tracy writes:

Four hours after being sentenced to die, I found myself inside a cell the State of Texas had spent the previous two weeks modifying for me in anticipation of me receiving a sentence of death.

This specifically modified cell is housed on 12 building A Pod 1 Section and is the section named ‘Death Watch.’ The Death Watch Section is for those Death Row inmates whose appeals have run out and have *received their execution date. Their date to die...*

³⁹ Guenther, 185.

⁴⁰ Guenther, 125.

The Death Watch Section has 14 cells—all with cameras inside the cells in the upper left hand corner with a view of the entire cell. There are monitors inside two separate control pickets, two different wardens officers and a surveillance office where the footage inside the cells can be viewed. A Texas senator even has access to this live footage. There is *zero privacy*. The cameras were installed years ago under the pretext of helping prevent suicide attempts. *Allegedly so Texas could preserve the condemned life until they were ready to extinguish it themselves.*⁴¹

This example demonstrates the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of solitary confinement; Tracy is being constantly surveilled, not only by correctional officers walking by, but by everyone who has access to the 24-hour footage of him in his cell. He cannot escape from being watched and monitored, to ensure that he does not transgress the boundary of suicide. Paradoxical, of course, because the state has already sentenced him to death. His death sentence is an indication that his personhood, his humanity, his complexity and agency, have all been made invisible.

Such invisibility brings about a form of state-sanctioned social death. Guenther defines the socially dead as, “...not merely nonpersons but rather, in Dayan’s words, “depersonalized persons” ... They are persons whose social significance has been crossed out, as if they were no longer with us.”⁴² So social death is a status, or lack thereof, that different groups, not limited to those in solitary confinement, can experience in society. What I find particularly interesting about this concept, reading through the lens of Turner, is the liminal nature of social death. Social death is inherently a liminal state because one is both and neither —society acknowledges that they are physically alive, but regards them as socially dead. To be socially dead is to occupy a liminal, in-between role. Solitary confinement constitutes an intense form of social liminality

⁴¹ Tracy, Billy Joel. “*Voices from Solitary: Living on Death Watch.*” Solitary Watch, September 22, 2019. <https://solitarywatch.org/2019/09/24/voices-from-solitary-living-on-death-watch/>.

Italics are mine.

⁴² Guenther, xxiv.

in which, if we consider the prison as an extension of our state, or society, one is completely controlled by the rules of their state/society, but simultaneously not allowed to be an actual member of that society.

Guenther's notion of social death fits well with many other analyses of solitary confinement. Sociologist Erving Goffman, for example, writes about the social death of prisoners in "total institutions," referring to penitentiary-style prisons. In a manner similar to Guenther's notion of intersubjectivity, Goffman argues that the prison severs a person from their previous social ties, and thus, their identity. He writes that it is "through a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self," that prisoners experience a ritualized death.⁴³ It is these acts of degradation and humiliation that bring about social death, transforming persons into depersonalized persons.

One example of this type of acts is the strip search; many incarcerated or previously incarcerated individuals regard the experience of being strip-searched as traumatic. Laura Whitehorn, who was a political prisoner for fourteen years, discusses the trauma of strip-searches. Whitehorn says, "The point is not to locate contraband; it's to reduce you to a completely powerless person... It reduces you to an object, not worthy of being defended. The message is, *'your body is meaningless, why don't you want this man to put his hands all over you?'* Very, very deeply damaging ..."⁴⁴ Yvonne Smith, who was incarcerated in the Valley State Prison for women, writes about her experiences being strip searched:

They don't do this because of the 'safety and security of the institution,' they do it for humiliation. There is nothing we can do between our cells and the shower, no way we can pick anything up [Women at VSPW were subject to strip searches every time they were taken out of their cells to go have a

⁴³ Smith, Caleb. *The prison and the American imagination*. Yale University Press, 2009. 37.

⁴⁴ Guenther, 189.

shower.] They're with us, watching us the whole time. They're just trying to
*break us down.*⁴⁵

Albert Woodfox also speaks to this aspect of humiliation in connection to his experiences being strip-searched. Similar to Smith, Woodfox was in a solitary confinement unit called the CCR, where prisoners had to be strip-searched every time they were taken to shower. Woodfox writes, "...I'd learned enough about chattel slavery to see a connection between the unnecessary strip searches for CCR prisoners and how African American men and women were treated as slaves... It's one of the most humiliating experiences a human can endure."⁴⁶

The strip-search exemplifies the notion of social death — by acknowledging that the prisoners might have contraband, and that they have a living body which can be violated — there is an agreement that the prisoner is physically alive. However, the insistence that the body must be violated, that there is no need for consent, or even plausible cause — as Whitehorn describes, the insistence upon the meaninglessness of the body — illustrates how the prisoner is seen as socially dead. Guenther writes, "In a strip search, the site of corporeal and intercorporeal 'mattering,' is literally put into the hands of another whose insistent message is that the body of the person being searched does not matter."⁴⁷ If this is a continual practice, which it is, as many prisoners in solitary are strip-searched every time they are taken to the showers, then the meaning reinforces itself every time — this message is recursive, in that it self-legitimizes every time a strip-search is performed. The message itself has no legitimacy without the precedent for the act. The act of the strip-search, and the message it carries, exemplifies the process of creating such "depersonalized persons" — the socially dead.

⁴⁵ Guenther, 190.

⁴⁶ Woodfox, Albert. *Solitary: a Memoir*. HarperCollins Canada, Limited, 2019. pp. 165.

⁴⁷ Guenther, 190.

Conclusion:

In the end, theorizing about solitary confinement does little tangible work for those 80,000 people currently in it. However, continued attention means new ways of conceptualizing this practice. Study after study has shown that solitary confinement is harmful, and yet, only a handful of states have worked to reform the practice, and very few states have called to eliminate solitary confinement. So it is absolutely necessary to highlight the voices of those who are in solitary confinement, those who, despite having every measure put in place to silence them, to make them invisible, are speaking out against the torture that is being forced upon them. Those subjected to solitary confinement across the United States have found incredible ways to speak out. At Pelican Bay prison in California, four incarcerated people in solitary confinement organized a group of 30,000 prisoners in a hunger strike to protest the use of indefinite solitary confinement.⁴⁸ Hunger strikes like this one have made national news, creating opportunities for change. As one of the Pelican Bay hunger strike statements says, “This struggle has contributed to progressively changing attitudes in society and prisons. Our collective efforts have repeatedly exposed the state’s contradictions and sparked the people’s appetite for freedom and new social relationships.”⁴⁹ People in solitary confinement are speaking out, not only to improve their own conditions, but rather to fight against the inhumanity of the prison system. It is our job then, to listen, and amplify their voices, to render their humanity visible once again.

⁴⁸ “How 4 Inmates Launched A Statewide Hunger Strike From Solitary.” NPR. NPR, March 6, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/03/06/286794055/how-four-inmates-launched-a-statewide-hunger-strike-from-solitary>.

⁴⁹ Marks, Claude, and Isaac Ontiveros. “Pelican Bay Hunger Strike: Four Years and Still Fighting.” CounterPunch.org, July 9, 2015. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/09/pelican-bay-hunger-strike-four-years-and-still-fighting/>.

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