



“Here I Sit in this Dismal Crypt”: Insider Interpretations of the Canadian Carceral Necropolis

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Abstract

This paper draws from the art produced in the *Cell Count* archive, a quarterly bulletin that the Prisoners’ Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) Support Action Network distributes to persons incarcerated in Canadian prisons. The authors use necropolitical theory to undertake a content analysis of prisoner art to gain insights into how carceral life affects the incarcerated. Specifically, prisoners convey prisons as death-worlds. The mass incarceration practices, which are a mechanism of settler colonialism and white supremacy, strip populations down to bare life. First, prisoners depict their carceral experience as a kind of slow, protracted process of dying. Second, they describe themselves using imagery of the dead. Third, they explore notions of escape or release through an angelic or spiritual afterlife.

Keywords

Death; incarceration; prison; poetry; outsider art; necropolitics.

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Introduction

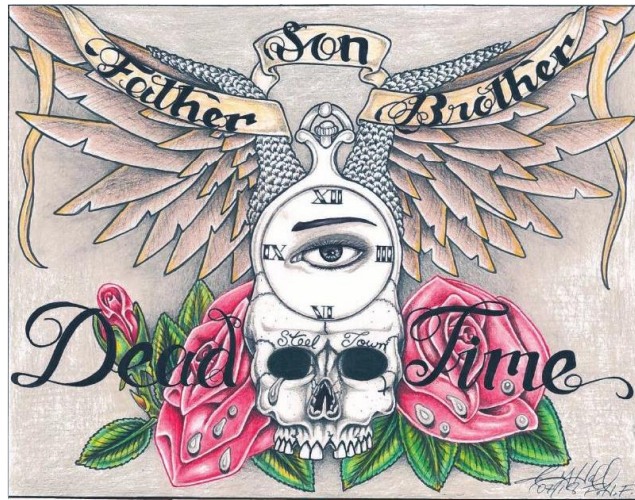


Figure 1: Cover of *Cell Count*, vol. 85 (FHF 2018: 1)

The image featured on the 85th cover of *Cell Count* includes at its center a stopwatch with wings. The stopwatch is affixed to the brow of a crying skull. A banner across the upper third of the image reads, “Father, Son, Brother,” while “Dead Time” is scrawled across the lower third of the image (see Figure 1). If the father, son, and brother represent the artist FHF himself, we can surmise that he is mourning his own death. This cover image is one of many artistic contributions featured in *Cell Count*, a quarterly bulletin that the Prisoners’ Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) Support Action Network (PASAN) compiles, prints, and distributes to persons incarcerated in prisons and prisoner advocacy agencies across Canada¹ at both the federal and provincial levels.² As FHF’s work illustrates — in the stopwatch marking time, in the body wasted away to bone, in the wings implying an angelic afterlife — and as our analysis of prisoner art in 91 back issues of *Cell Count* showed, Canadian prisoners have long been, and continue to be, preoccupied with death.

In this paper, we present and analyze emblematic examples of prisoners’ artistic contributions to *Cell Count* that depict prison living as a kind of death. We treat this data set as something we are calling “insider art,” which Ursprung (1997) defined as an artefact produced by a marginalized person rather than by a professional artist. Insider art has value for anti-carceral criminology research and political action as long as prison researchers and prisoner advocates are willing to bring artistic works into public discourse and to draw lessons from them. As Brown (2014) notes in her study of activist art, anti-carceral criminology would benefit from visual representations of prison life that re-substantiate disappeared subjects, or that restore prisoners to political life. Consideration of prisoner art can re-humanize prison populations and can be instructive in prisoner justice and prison abolition projects. Indeed, a focus on experiences “close up to confinement” would enable a deeper conversation on decarceration, abolition, and “engaged scholarly and activist production against the carceral state” (Brown and Schept 2017: 440) that frames the critical carceral studies movement, a shift that mainstream criminology has been slow to adopt. Our intention is to begin with the premise that prisoners’ artistic works convey important truths about the prison experience. Such a premise enables us to carve out a space for Canadian prisoners’ perspectives in carceral and criminological scholarly fields.

Our consideration of insiders’ perspectives allowed us to develop an understanding of how prisoners interpret Canadian carceral conditions: prison space is saturated with iterations of death. First, across their creative contributions to *Cell Count*, we found that prisoners depict their carceral experience as a kind of slow, protracted process of dying. Second, we found that when describing themselves, prisoners invoke imagery of the dead, including imagery of corpses and skeletons. Third, we found that prisoners

explore notions of escape or release through an angelic or spiritual afterlife. In sum, we simply could not make sense of prisoners’ perspectives without theorizing about death.

These findings informed our decision to analyze *Cell Count* art using necropolitical theory. Coined by Mbembe (2003a, 2003b) as an extension of Foucauldian biopolitics,³ necropolitics refers to political, social, legal, and economic arrangements that dehumanize a population, or confer a status of living death. Necropolitics encompasses not only the state’s right to kill, but also its exposure of certain populations to social and literal death through alienation, brutal deprivation, and injury. In this paper, following the lead of the artists whose work we analyzed, we join that tradition of conceptualizing the carceral system as a necropolitical tool of settler colonialism and white supremacy.

This paper begins with a consideration of insider art. Specifically, we consider what constitutes insider art, how to access insider art, and what analyses of insider art can contribute to anti-carceral criminology or critical carceral studies. Next, we describe our data set, and we explain and justify our use of a necropolitical analytic framework. In a presentation of our key findings, we undertake a necropolitical analysis of particularly illustrative examples of prisoner writing and visual art. Specifically, these examples associate prison experience with slow dying, rotting death, and the afterlife. We intend to show that the structure of prison living is unbearable, and unjust. Through their work, the artists we highlight in this paper show how they are made to feel disposable and like living death. We hope that showcasing their rich inner thoughts and feelings alongside their skilled and creative expression will clearly show that they deserve better treatment.

Literature Review: On Art’s Purposes

Insider art — the term we are using to describe our data set — is derived from a concept that actually implies its inverse: outsider art.. This concept originated in a genre that Dubuffet (1949) called “*l’art brut*,” which is French for raw art. Referencing art produced by an incarcerated population,⁴ Dubuffet sought to distinguish these artefacts from works created by professionalized artists. For Dubuffet, professional art is “cooked” via the aesthetic judgment of industry peers and consumers. Conversely, the value of raw art is rooted in its authentic expression of everyday living (Kosut 2006; Nelson 2016; Parr 2006). It does not need to be aesthetically “good;” rather, raw art merely needs to be truthful. Cardinal (1972) coined the term “outsider art” to describe the raw art genre in English and to stress this distinction between the mainstream art world and populations producing art from the margins — populations excluded not only from this industry, but also from traditional forms of social participation. We, the authors of this paper, are critical of outsider art theory because the distinction that has been made between the mainstream and the margin belies notable inequalities. Dubuffet himself recognized there was public interest in raw art and raw art influenced modern artistic movements (Kosut 2006), all of which implies that the genre is capable of meeting the rigors of aesthetic judgment after all. However, when the art produced by carceral subjects is exhibited, collectors and curators have historically benefitted from remuneration, status, and access to the professional arts community, while the artists themselves have been limited to the therapeutic benefits of their labor (Nelson 2016).

This is not to say that prison art lacks therapeutic value. Carceral scholarship has rather rigorously studied the therapeutic and rehabilitative potential of prison art therapy programs (Barak and Stebbins 2017; Brewster 2014; Ferszt et al. 2004; Gussak 2006, 2007; Martin et al. 2014; Takkal et al. 2018; van Lith et al. 2013). Prison arts programs, which are largely initiated and delivered by volunteers and community agencies, have also been found to increase self-confidence and self-esteem, develop literacy, and lead to greater engagement in educational programming (Nugent and Loucks 2011). However, the designation of prisoner art as therapeutic has resulted in a disproportionate focus in scholarship on art and imprisonment, and prison art programs with very narrow aims. Cheliotis (2014) has been critical of this designation, arguing that the arts in these scholarly and carceral contexts “may be employed to hide the imposition of repression and human suffering in prisons behind pretensions of humanistic care” (17; see also Christie 2004). Thus, while research on the “positive” benefits of these programs may appear to be

compelling, it does not shed light on or chronicle the experiences of prisonization for the prisoner. Such research also fails to account for the multifarious ways that these institutionally approved arts programs, and subsequent artistic outputs, can be used as part of correctional practice and as a means to gain insight into prisoners’ psyches to further extend pathologization and/or punishment. This follows Brown and Schept’s (2007) critique of mainstream criminology research that the knowledge produced often serves to “reify and reproduce carceral logics and practices” (440). Therapeutic art programs not only exploit artists, but also make prisons appear rehabilitative, thus, glossing over the ways in which the carceral environment remains profoundly violent.

Our intention is to sidestep the fraught aesthetic/therapeutic divide posited in scholarship on outsider or prison art, and instead to argue that prisoner art has important pedagogical and political purposes. Specifically, prisoner art can yield lessons and serve as a call to action.⁵ As Cheliotis (2014) admits, “the arts ... constitute an alternative lens through which to understand state-sanctioned punishment and its place in public consciousness,” especially so “in the case of imprisonment: its nature, its functions, and the ways in which these register in public perceptions and desires” (16). Prisoner art and prisoner writing thus have a great potential to expand critical carceral studies due to the insights they yield about oppressive prison conditions and complex prisoner interiorities (see, for example, Goessling 2020; Perkinson 2009; Piche et al. 2014; Rhmhs 2012).

To better capture our project aims, we refer to our data set as “insider art.” Ursprung’s (1997) term “insider art” describes art that emerges not from outside a wider community, but from inside a world unto itself. For Ursprung (1997), the production of insider art is a way of surviving what he calls the “oppressive dysfunctional milieu” (17) of carceral systems. When this art reaches outside the confines of a prison, it can facilitate an understanding of what prison culture is like. A shared understanding of prison life through art humanizes the artist (Gussak 2020), and demystifies entrenched cultural narratives related to incarceration (Motyl and Arghavan 2018). In these ways, insider art can share common aims with prison scholarship “to make the prison world ‘intelligible;’ to make moral blindness less likely or possible [; and] to enlarge sympathies in ways that can reshape human consciousness and with it the structures of society” (Liebling 2014: 481).

However, insider art itself poses key problems in relation to access. Prison gates do more than keep prisoners in — they keep others out. Convincing prison officials that they can trust a researcher thus becomes a central part of the negotiations for physical access and permission to enter a prison. Prison officials dictate who the researcher can speak to, where these conversations can be held, and who else has to be present “within sight, but outside hearing range” (Gaborit 2019: 19). Gaborit (2019) engages in unpacking access by questioning what prison research means within these constraints and whether or not this is the best way to gain insight into prisoners’ everyday life. Researchers must be deemed trustworthy by a prison to gain entry, and any such deliberations about trust between the researcher and prisoner, prisoner and the prison, and researcher and the prison are secondary, if attended to at all. Why is a prison, as an institution, deemed a trustworthy source from which researchers can draw accurate and truthful accounts of prisoner life?

As Jewkes (2014) asks of critical criminologists and penal abolitionist scholars: “How do [researchers] resolve the personal, ethical dilemmas associated with ‘keeping on side’ with prison staff, and of doing research that advances their careers and may have other personal benefits, while doing little (at the time, at least) to challenge the institution of the prison itself?” (389). This question does not seek to discount the prison research conducted by scholars inside prisons; rather, it seeks to raise questions about *how* and *who* to access when conducting research that commences with permission from a penal institution. Jewkes (2014) notes that “there is something about prisons being so spatially and temporally defined — and in the most limiting, constraining ways imaginable — that makes prison ethnography unlike any other qualitative enterprise” (388; see also Piche et al. 2014; Ruyter 2017; Wacquant 2002). It should also be remembered that despite all the best intentions, research praxis is experienced differently by the researcher and the researched.

Prison officials may be the de facto gatekeeper of the imprisoned, but as acclaimed performer and political activist Paul Robeson (1989) famously stated, "Artists are the gatekeepers of the truth. We are civilization's radical voice."⁶ In that vein, there is something unique about using *Cell Count* as a site of data collection. The works were created of the artists' own volition, and not under the guise of a research project or the watchful eye of an omnipresent correctional officer. There were no pre-existing research parameters guiding what could, or should, be artistically depicted. These pieces were created of prisoners' own accord in the cells, program rooms, shared living spaces, loggia hallways, or other prison spaces in which they are contained. Prisoners' struggles, anger, frustrations of their own prisonization, dreams, and aspirations of hope are underwritten in the emotional texture of their artistic pieces. They not only tell the stories that they want to tell, but the stories that they want others (i.e., *Cell Count* readers) to hear. For these reasons, we found *Cell Count* contributions clearly represented a form of insider art that is worthy of studying to make sense of the worlds constructed inside Canadian prisons.

Methodological Considerations: Introduction to *Cell Count*

Cell Count is a service rendered by PASAN, which is a community-based prisoner health and harm reduction organization that delivers support services, education programs, and advocacy initiatives. Its headquarters are located in the Canadian metropolis of Toronto, which PASAN acknowledges is the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, Petun, Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the New Credit Indigenous peoples (PASAN 2019: 2).⁷ PASAN describes *Cell Count* as a "unique publication [that] contains content by/for/about prisoners and ex-prisoners" ("What We Do," PASAN 2020: para. 4). PASAN distributes printed copies, approximately 2,000 issues a year, to Canadian prisoners, correctional facilities and agencies, ex-prisoners, and prisoners' families. Within federal correctional facilities, the publications are most often disseminated throughout the prison by institutional inmate committees. The publication is free for prisoners and those living with HIV/AIDS in Canada, and *Cell Count* encourages subscribers outside these facilities to donate in support of the publication costs. The bulletin is funded by federal and provincial health agencies; PASAN accepts no support from government correctional systems to maintain the editorial integrity of the publication. Editors reserve the right not to publish material that poses a security risk, encourages violence or self-harm, potentially includes self-incriminating information, or uses discriminatory language; otherwise, contributions are published uncensored. Potential contributors voluntarily send submissions via mail or call PASAN's office to have their work transcribed, and they choose whether they will present their work anonymously or will be extended credit.⁸ The bulletin may not tap into professional arts circles, but the artefact furthers advocacy efforts by building lines of communication across prisons, and among prisons and community actors or organizations.

Each issue contains standard sections, including the *Bulletin Board*, which provides regular updates on advocacy and support organizations, *News on the Block*, which collects news clippings on prison conditions and policy from a range of established media sources, and *Health and Harm Reduction* and *Resources*, both of which contain strategies for managing, among other health conditions, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, substance dependency, and mental distress. Prisoners can contribute to opinion pieces for the *Writings on the Wall* section, poetry for the *From Inside* section, short-form statements (1–2 sentences long) for the *Prison Tweets* section, works that mourn the death of a loved one for the *Obituary* section, and visual pieces for the *Art* section.

With PASAN's blessing, we accessed and collected *Cell Count* back issues for the purpose of a wider arts-informed research project. Our research team had a complete archive of back issues from 1995 to 2020 in both digital and hardcopy formats. For this paper, members of our research team focused on gathering and organizing poetic writing in the section titled, *From Inside*, and visual works found on the cover art and in the section titled, *Art*. Other members of the team focused on content from different sections of the paper. After assembling a data set of artistic materials, we conducted a qualitative content and thematic analysis by coding lines of poetic text and imagery. This approach is in line with methodologies used in arts-informed qualitative research projects (Conquergood 2002; Vaismoradi and Snelgrove 2019). Our coding scheme was open-ended, developed through an iterative and generative process involving

observation, team discussion, and cross-referencing with content in other, non-artistic sections of the bulletin. Through this process, we found that we began with simple descriptive codes (e.g., the frequency of references to skulls), but that the coding became increasingly more sophisticated when it came to grouping together culturally significant or emotionally resonant ideas (e.g., hopelessness was a popular code that included references to, say, dismal crypts).

We did not begin with the intention of finding death as a theme; rather, death found us, over and over again. Death features prominently throughout *Cell Count* issues. The theme was found not only in artistic renderings, but also in the obituaries that make all too clear that mourning loss is central to the prison experience. It appeared in the repeated directions on how to reduce harm associated with substance use, which illustrate how to deal with the persistent ways in which prison populations are exposed to risk. Death haunted the news clippings that piece together the struggles prison advocacy organizations have had with ending solitary confinement, introducing harm reduction programs, and responding to state violence — and all these campaigns target conditions that engender physical and psychic injury. *Cell Count*'s preoccupation with death is alarmingly clear and should function as a call for prison justice.

Given that death was such a prominent theme in our findings, we decided to interpret our data using a necropolitical analytic framework. Mbembe's necropolitical theory is a development of Foucauldian biopolitics or state power over life (where “life” refers to population health). The Greek “necro” in Mbembe's term references state power over death. Mbembe describes necropolitical spaces as locations in which the state suspends its responsibility to preserve life due to the presumed disposability of the persons sent and kept there, usually due to their race or ethnicity. Another word for this phenomenon is “death-world.” Death-world refers to “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 2003b: 40). To be of the living dead means that a person's life has been reduced to a biological fact, stripped of potentialities, denied conditions of flourishing thought wasted on them.⁹

While Mbembe's necropolis encompassed the plantation and the colony, the prison functions as a modern version of a racialized, colonized space that marks and treats populations as the living dead (Palacios 2014). The prison stands as a fortress that, under the rhetoric of public security and correction, serves as a space “of exclusion, alienation, and social (sometimes even literal) death” (Marques and Monchalin forthcoming). The prison is not only “underwritten by racialized colonial histories and practices” (Marques and Monchalin forthcoming), but also built on the necropolitical premise of the devaluation and presumed disposability of incarcerated — and over-incarcerated Black and Indigenous — populations. On this basis, we found that adopting a necropolitical lens for the analysis enabled us to interpret our findings from the *Cell Count* data set. In what follows, we explore the different iterations of death we found, and how prisoners use death to describe the necropolitical forces at work in their environments.

Necropolitical Analysis of Insider Art

Nothing but Time: Reflections on Slow Dying

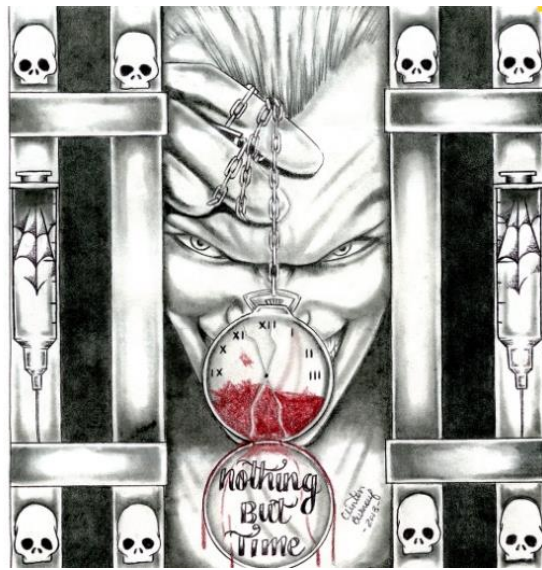


Figure 2: Image by CB (2013: 1)

CB's (2013) contribution to volume 72 of *Cell Count* features a face with a sharp widow's peak and a leering smile. The frame of the image consists of jail cell bars, with outer columns fashioned into syringes, and capitals resembling skulls. The syringes are cracked in patterns that mimic cobwebs. The centered menacing figure is holding up a broken stopwatch on a chain. The stopwatch is bleeding red in an otherwise black-and-white picture. The inscription carved into the watch cover reads, “nothing But Time” (see Figure 2). This cover image exemplifies a common theme across *Cell Count* contributions that time — its pacing, its abundance, its emptiness — is dangerous in prison. Many artistic pieces in *Cell Count* feature bones and blood in association with time and thus frame the danger that time poses as lethal. SB (2012: 13) makes similar connections between death and time in poetic form; the following is an excerpt from his piece aptly called *Time*, featured in volume 26:

*The true sense of time
Only exists in my head
Where it keeps ticking away
Until I am dead*

In this piece, SB is suggesting that in contrast with how time moves outside prison, within the prison setting, he experiences time as inexorable and disconnected from processes of living. For SB and CB, as implied in their work, death not only marks time's endpoint but also infects time's passage. Time drags—ticking away, draining away, as the cobwebs gather. Time is a defining feature of the prison experience, as behind bars there is nothing, only time.

That time can be experienced so differently contingent upon setting marks prisons as death-worlds that are sharply divided from the world of the living. These divisions map onto racial lines. Buntman (2019) argues that prisons are a Canadian colonial tool that extends the historical work of separating out and disappearing Indigenous populations from the white settler body politic (see also Monchalin 2016). This argument is congruent with investigative journalism that frames Canadian prisons as the “new residential schools” (Macdonald 2016: para 4); residential schools once functioned as a settler colonial mechanism for necropolitical population management.¹⁰ Quoted at length in Mbembe's work, Frantz Fanon (1963) echoes this notion of separation by calling the colonial world Manichaean: that is, a world of dualisms in

which black and white, evil and good, reserve and colony are sharply divided.¹¹ The modern spatialization of colonialism is made manifest in the materiality of the prison walls and bars, and excused by the imprisoned (and largely racialized) population's presumed-natural association with criminality. Fanon (1963) would describe this narrative as Manichaeism reaching its logical conclusion in the dehumanization of the colonial subject. Due to the necropolitical work of carving out the prison space as its own world, time works differently in prisons. Such that, "all inmates when entering prison discover abruptly that the ordinary ethics organizing interactions outside are suspended" (Le Marcis 2019: 79; see also Scott and Gosling 2016).

It is significant that *Cell Count* artists characterize the movement of time as slow or sluggish. Consider the following lines from DH's (2002: 9) *Hell* in volume 27:

*Living like this is slowly dying
After awhile you give up trying*

Similarly, here is RM's (2007: 11) *Trapped* in volume 46:

*My spirit slowly drains
And my confidence shatters
From waking up trapped in a place
To where nothing matters*

Prisoners' poetic interpretations of time as a thing that slowly drains or wastes away echo Berlant's (2007) concept of slow death as "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (754; see also Puar 2007). Berlant sought to develop Mbembe's analysis to show how cultural practices exceeding or existing beyond sovereign force can play a crucial role in the administration of bodies. It is thus possible to imagine a prison culture that has the power to structure prisoners' possibilities. Forms of slow death reflect the effects of necropolitical forces wearing people down (Haritaworn et al. 2014). Consider how DH is worn out to the point of no longer even trying, and how RM describes prison as a place where nothing matters. The slowness of time signifies that prison living lacks purpose. The authors are communicating that prisons' mechanisms of social control radically devalue and reduce prisoners' lives (Knadler 2017).

Corpses and Crypts: Prisoners as the Living Dead



Figure 3: Photograph by MEY (2018: 7)

A black-and-white photograph from volume 84 features a woman with sweeping side bangs and cat-eye makeup. The artist, MEY (2018), overlays the photograph with drawings in colored markers to transform the face into a Cinco de Mayo mask that includes a black silhouette with red ruffles over the nose, blue lines

and brown dots along the cheekbones, and purple stitches extending from the corners of the mouth (see Figure 3). This figure embodies the Day of the Dead, a Mexican celebration involving deceased loved ones rising from their graves. MEY’s work is one of many artistic contributions to *Cell Count* to depict skulls — imagery that signifies the desiccation and decay of the body. In fact, skeletons as signifiers of the (un-)dead cut across *Cell Count*’s archive as one of the bulletin’s most common artistic themes. Death as a theme also surfaces in poetic works that characterize incarceration as an entombment. See, for example, the following excerpt from DS’s (2005) untitled poem in volume 40 that reads:

I open my eyes, I’m in a box

Similarly, consider the following excerpt from RM’s (2002: 9) volume 26 entry titled, *Dismal Crypt* that reads:

Here I sit in this dismal crypt

DS and RM show how they become the dead through containment, or by virtue of their container.

Read through a necropolitical lens, these artists are describing their experience of loss, as signaled by the emptiness and solitariness of their box or crypt. Mbembe (2003b) defines the condition of living death as a “triple loss: loss of a ‘home,’ loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status” (21). The losses amount to total domination, such that those subject to necropolitical forces lose every key feature of living a human, agential life. Another word for this is social death. To the extent that prison sentences dislocate the sentenced, the loss of home is integral to criminal penalty. Loss of political or legal status could be reflected in prisoners’ lack of access to community resources and services. Finally, Mbembe’s triple loss includes the loss of bodily autonomy. Along these lines, references to rotting bodies — a kind of body out of control — are quite common in *Cell Count* poetry. In his poem, *Bone Yard*, printed in volume 58, SPS (2010: 10) states:

*Maggots strip our dry bones...
As I look away and leave you alone...
Reapers say thanks it’s still not too soon*

Similarly, in *The Hole*, printed in volume 71, NK (2013: 16) states:

*Just let me be asleep in peace
And leave my body to rot alone*

These verses frame death in relation to being left or made to leave. The bodies featured are described as rotting, being stripped away, when they are not tended to or cared for. As the titles of the poems indicate, prison often comes to signify a lonely grave.

These visceral references to bodily decomposition conjure images of zombies, the living dead of horror narratives. Following Mbembe, in necropolitical theory, zombification refers to the processes by which “individuals are put in a state of death” (Higgins and Rolfe 2017: 977; see also Crichtlow 2014; Linnemann et al. 2014). It is not just that prisons carve out new worlds and new spaces in which to exist; rather, it is that the rules that govern these carved-out spaces do work to devalue bodies. The devalued are rendered undeserving of protection and care. They are “kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity” (Mbembe 2003b: 21). It should be noted that Mbembe was describing the atrocities borne out through enslavement; however, modern prisons, which are profoundly violent environments, have their own mechanisms for inducing states of injury. To add to that, prisoner bodies are also denied agency, as though they were in a horror movie in which a virus or witch doctor controls their movements.¹² Kwate and Threadcraft (2007) reference an element of zombification where

“the anxieties of White supremacy and the sanctions it invites takes over the body, animating the body’s very movements” (550). This total control over bodily movements is all too apparent in regimented prison routines, and in guards’ use of force and physical restraint.

Imprisoned populations can be re-signified as the social dead, but they are also exposed to material injury and actual death. As Haritaworn et al. (2014) argue, members of already stigmatized groups “deemed to be beyond rehabilitation are not only physically removed from the social realm, but, more fundamentally, are exposed to premature death” (6). Prisons function as an extension of colonial and white supremacist practices that swallow up Indigenous and racialized populations through the processes of criminalization and incarceration. Exemplifying this point, SC (2006: 9) mourns the loss of Indigenous women in *Too Many Sisters Have Died*, a contribution to volume 44, which reads:

*I drop to my knees
Asking Great Spirit, Please,
Have mercy for my people
You see the many tears I’ve cried
As they fell from me
They are a symbol of every
Anishinaabeg queen that has died*¹³

SC’s prayer is urgent in its evocation of the far-too-many Indigenous women who have been lost to their communities across Canada. Death here is not symbolic; it is not simply a reference to the systematic dislocation of a population or the stripping of rights and status. Biological death is the logical conclusion to these structural exclusions, as Higgins and Rolfe (2017) argue, “In the most extreme moments of necropolitics, physical bodies are literally disappearing without signification or [a] bereavement ceremony” (977). The number of Indigenous women who have gone missing or been murdered in recent Canadian memory constitutes a national crisis and reflects an imbalance in the application of criminal justice. As long as Indigenous subjects are presumed to be disposable, the operation of necropolitical relations will result in the criminalization of their actions, and legal abandonment when they are victims (Pratt 2002; Razack 2002, 2015).¹⁴

Angels and Birds: Freedom as Flight



Figure 4: Graphite drawing by JH (2018: 10)

Volume 84 features JH’s (2018) graphite drawing of a woman sitting seductively in a translucent shirt and underwear with long feathered wings flowing from her back (see Figure 4). JH’s soft and inviting angel contrasts with the starker, more intense images of skulls and devils that are common to *Cell Count’s* pages.

Depictions of angels and creatures with the capacity for flight mark an important departure from the archive's imagery, and showcase prisoners' more affirmative reflections. Skull imagery was associated with words connoting loss, waste, or death. Conversely, wing imagery, an incredibly common motif in *Cell Count*, was attached to words like freedom, courage, and hope. Consider the following verse from PS's (1997: 2) untitled contribution to volume 8:

*We would see those who were shackled
Begin to soar and fly so high*

Consider also the following lines from JP's (2002: 7) poem in volume 27, entitled, *A Wish on a Star*:

*But lose no faith.
Tomorrow brings new wings.*

These lines referencing new wings and flight, and images of pretty angels offer a palpably optimistic interpretation of death.

These artists' views resemble Motyl and Arghavan's (2018) observations of Abu Ghraib detainees who wrote poetry that the "very act of continuing to write ... constitutes a performative survival of neocolonial necropolitics" (129). Art is a kind of survival strategy, an act of resistance that breathes life into the interiority of subjects otherwise deemed dead. Prison culture itself might engender a death-world with its own internal rules of order, and might embrace processes of abandonment and injury, but art can reveal that subjugated groups are not wholly defined by their subjugation. Indeed, as Cheliotis (2014) notes, "even — or perhaps especially — in such oppressive environments as prisons, the exercise of power is always bound to meet with some degree of resistance" (18). Fanon (1963) references this relationship, stating, "The first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep its limits. Hence the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality" (15). For Fanon the vibrancy and vitality of dreams provide a kind of freedom in a context in which authorities work to enact total domination.



Figure 5: Drawing by PC (2015: 8)

Angel imagery offers a clear antidote to creative interpretations of death and dying; however, it is worth noting that *Cell Count's* most common depictions of flight focus instead on birds. A popular theme in the archive, birds are often depicted in flight over walls and fences or moving through broken openings in walls. In one example, a contribution to volume 77, PC (2015) drew a cardinal — a symbol of hope that usually represents winter transitioning into springtime — perched on the barbed wire fencing of a prison facility. That the bird can so easily breach prison fencing may evoke transcendence reminiscent of Fanon's dreams, but the storm clouds that frame PC's cardinal are a tempering force (see Figure 5). The birds of the *Cell Count* archive clearly and repeatedly symbolize artists' inner selves, but the imagery is often

layered into works on lost hope (e.g., in poems where birds are caged or forget how to fly). In the poem *Destiny*, featured in volume 40, DW (2005: 8) draws a sharp contrast between the spiritual and the material, stating:

Yes my spirit is free to fly, I'm not

These artists create work to assert they are worthy of more than bare life, but there is a fragility and a vulnerability to their assertions, as it is the function of the necropolis to exhaust their efforts.

Conclusion

In its mission statement, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) states that it “contributes to public safety by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure, and humane control” (Commissioner’s Directive 2018). The CSC has a duty of care to those imprisoned; however, looking to the themes expressed through art that are interwoven throughout this paper, it is evident that the necropolitical logics of alienation, exclusion, and death underwrite the Canadian carceral experience. Prisons house already vulnerable populations who are further othered, marginalized, and rendered vulnerable as a result of their prisonization. These populations and the conditions of their confinement are often conveyed to the general public as being required to maintain public safety from the threat of harm; however, prisoner art casts a light on how the conditions of confinement themselves serve to victimize and harm.

We hope the images and lines of poetry selected for this paper exemplified a key truth about prison living: that is, that it is not really living at all, and that prisoners understand themselves to be experiencing a kind of death. We framed this work as insider art with the hope that the artistic pieces we analyzed would serve as entry points into the prison experience. They helped us discover and make sense of the prison as a death-world. This knowledge should have political and instructive value. It should move critical carceral scholars and prison advocates to call for prison justice — not reform but the wholesale dismantling of social institutions designed to dispose of populations.

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¹ Digital copies of *Cell Count's* back issues from 1995 to 2020 are available on PASAN's (“Cell Count” 2020) website:

<http://www.pasan.org/cell-count.html>.

² Canada’s correctional system operates at two levels: the provincial/territorial level and the federal level. Generally, sentence length demarcates in which system a sentence is served; for example, a sentence of 2 years or more is served at the federal correctional level, while a sentence length less than 2 years is served at the provincial level. In addition, those accused and held for pre-trial detention are housed in provincial facilities, alongside those convicted and sentenced for a period of less than two years. At the federal level, the Correctional Service of Canada is responsible for managing institutions of varying security levels (minimum, medium, and maximum) and supervising those released to the community under conditional release. Each province and territory in Canada has its own administering organization. In Ontario, the Ministry of the Solicitor General (formerly known as the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Service) serves as the administering organization.

³ In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) explores a concept he calls biopolitics, which he defines as a modern political framework under which the state includes natural life in its calculations and exercises of power. Foucauldian biopolitics is the “process by which life, at the beginning of the modern age, comes to be what is at stake in politics” (Agamben

- 1998: 10). Mbembe (2003a, 2003b) shows that death or “letting die” is part of the state’s strategy to preserve and produce only particular forms of life, and to leave behind the remainder.
- ⁴ Specifically, Dubuffet was referencing works produced by intellectually or psychiatrically disabled asylum residents (see Prinzhorn 1922), who share much in common with prisoners in relation to their carceral experience.
- ⁵ For more on the relationship between the pedagogical and political purposes of outsider art, see Rice et al. (2016).
- ⁶ For more on Paul Robeson and a discussion of his quote, see the film *BlackStar* (2020). See also the Paul Robeson Galleries at Rutgers University – Newark (<https://paulrobesonalleries.expressnewark.org/>).
- ⁷ Following PASAN’s lead, we acknowledge that our own work is conducted on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas, a branch of the greater Anishnaabeg Nation. A land acknowledgment signals that any analysis of carceral Canadian conditions requires grounding in settler colonial history.
- ⁸ Contributions remain the sole property of the artist or author but can be used for research and educational (among other) purposes without infringing copyright.
- ⁹ The concept of “bare life” has some relevance here. It derives from Agamben’s (1998) definition of *zoe*: “life exposed to death” (88). Braidotti (2007) understands bare life to be when a subject is reduced to “disposable matter” (5). Thus, there are clear connections between the experience of *zoe* and the conditions of the necropolis.
- ¹⁰ Under the 1876 *Indian Act*, Canada’s federal government forced Indigenous children into a residential school system for assimilative purposes. The last school closed in 1996. In 2008, Canada established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC 2016) to investigate this history. After gathering evidence of widespread neglect and abuse, the TRC concluded residential schools perpetuated cultural genocide.
- ¹¹ More specifically, Fanon (1963) investigated the division of the colony and the township. Mbembe (2003b) focused on the colony and the plantation. A modern application of this scholarship can include distinctly Canadian examples of the spatial dimensions of race, including the reserve, the ghetto, and the prison (see Haritaworn 2019; Maynard 2017; Palacios 2014; Razack 2002, 2015; Wacquant 2001).
- ¹² According to movies that feature the monster, these are standard causes for a zombie outbreak. It is worth noting that origin stories in the zombie genre reflect white supremacist anxiety about Black culture. See, for example, the references to “voodoo” or generic curses of a similar variety in *White Zombie* (1932), *Black Moon* (1934), and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Cultural representations of the zombie are thus already racially inflected, which make the processes of zombification or dehumanization easier to enact when imposed upon racialized persons or groups.
- ¹³ The Anishinaabe Nation represents 39 First Nations across, what is now called, the province of Ontario.
- ¹⁴ In a startling example, 49 sex workers — many of whom were Indigenous — disappeared from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside over a 27-year period. All of these sex workers died at the hands of a serial killer, who was apprehended in 2002. The man responsible for their deaths disposed of their bodies as though they were the offal he produced on his farm. Members of the neighborhood took precautions and took care of one another; however, local police overlooked the threat, signaling the legal abandonment of the victim pool. Both the killer and members of law enforcement treated members of this population as disposable (Cameron 2011).

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