

The Prisoner's Dream

Queer Visions from Solitary Confinement

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At first glance, the photograph *Space where the Robert Taylor Homes used to be* looks so mundane, so ordinary, that it doesn't demand more than a moment's attention. If you look hard enough you can see the Chicago skyline. The high-rises and skyscrapers are hidden behind the foreground of the image—the cracked cement and patched grass of an empty lot. The sky is slightly overcast. The grass is ragged and brown. There is a red fire hydrant and a tree that is either budding leaves or losing them. It might be March or perhaps November. The only remarkable thing about the photo is the empty space. A space so big in a city so large could not always have been empty. People, homes, buildings, and communities were there and are now only perceptible by their absence. The photo attempts to capture what can no longer be seen; it grasps at a kind of visible invisibility that characterizes what Shawn Michelle Smith calls “the edge of sight.”¹ The photo tells a story about what is left behind by newer systems of economic and carceral state power that have emerged over the last forty years. The dismantling and privatization of public housing like the Robert Taylor Homes in favor of the biopolitics of homelessness and an unprecedented system of racialized and gendered incarceration are critical features of this shift from the welfare state to the carceral state.² In this way,

the photo documents that the sign of economic and carceral violence is often nothing at all. Gravel and weeds are the detritus of a system that is unimaginable and sometimes incomprehensible.

The photo is part of an online and touring exhibition titled *Photo Requests from Solitary*, created in 2009 by the organization Tamms Year Ten, a grassroots coalition of artists, advocates, family members, and people formerly incarcerated in Tamms Correctional Center in southern Illinois. After facing years of opposition, Tamms Correctional Center was closed in 2013. Like some eighty thousand people in US prisons, the prisoners at Tamms were kept in solitary confinement, locked in small concrete cells for twenty-three to twenty-four hours a day without human contact, held often for years, or even decades, at a time.³ For this exhibition, the organization invited Tamms prisoners “to request a photograph of anything in the world, real or imagined, and promised to find volunteers to take them.” The organization wanted to give prisoners “a chance to see something they want to see, used to see, or may never see.” The resulting requests ranged from “a brown and white horse rearing in cold enough weather so that you can see his breath,” to “a picture of my auntie’s house on 63rd and Marshfield at 2:00 PM,” to “comic book heroes locked in epic battle.”⁴

By making visible what has been disappeared from the visual landscape, *Space where the Robert Taylor Homes used to be* is a sign of the forms of power that made Tamms possible. In other words, the carceral state makes itself known in what we see—the construction of hundreds of new jails and prisons in the post-1970s era—and by what has been erased and forgotten. By asking prisoners to imagine places and times beyond the visual constraints of the prison, the project documents the dreams, desires, and hopes of people held in a state of suspended death. Indeed, *Photo Requests from Solitary* asks the simple question, “What would a person in complete isolation want to see?”⁵ For this particular photo, the requester wanted to “have some picture of 53rd State thru 43rd State where they have took down the project Robert Taylor Homes.”⁶ The request was to see something that is no longer visible. But the photo also acts as a method for making known the forms of violence that evade normative modes of recognition and perception—



Fig. 1. *Space where the Robert Taylor Homes used to be.*
 Photo by Greg Ruffing. Courtesy of Tamms Year Ten.

the forced disappearance of people, buildings, resources, and communities under new systems of power that often go by the names freedom, justice, and equality. By showing the buildings and people that have been erased and forgotten, the photo details how what is known and seen are brought into being through ongoing processes of disappearance. *Photo Requests from Solitary* attempts to challenge social death by giving prisoners a glimpse of a world they once knew, hope to know, or will never know.

In this essay I explore what this exhibition conveys about the dreams, desires, and demands of prisoners held in solitary confinement. In *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen*, Shawn Michelle Smith argues that photography has the ability to deliver bodies “beyond the grasp” of those who control, detain, and define them. Photography can represent forms of “alternative perception” and modes of thought that seek the unseen and unknown so that the “ineffable—desire—[comes] into view” (AE, 71). Photography is one way that different conceptions of time, subjectivity, and power

might pierce the ongoing repetition of the old under the guise of the new. We can place the utopic possibilities of the photograph within José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queerness as "that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing."⁷ For Muñoz, "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there" (CU, 1). In this way, queerness is detached from identity, becoming a mode of thinking and feeling that can see beyond the pervasive and crushing weight of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and the carceral state. Indeed, the visions created by the prisoners and artists in *Photo Requests from Solitary* see beyond the "prison house" of the here and now to spaces and temporalities that may seem familiar but are ultimately otherworldly, in that they demand an undoing of normative epistemologies, ontologies, and order of the world itself. The queerness of the photos marks a radical departure from the normativizing racial, gendered, and sexual violence of the prison and the world more broadly. Seeing beyond the normative violence of the everyday, the queerness of the photos point to ways of living, thinking, seeing, and organizing life that render the prison and its regimes of social death abnormal and unnatural. In this essay, I argue that the photos document the violence of the carceral state by pointing to a utopic time and place beyond the grasp of the prison—a place toward what I'm calling "the prisoner's dream" draws us.

Captured Vision, Queer Dreams, and the Time of the Dead

Photo Requests from Solitary attempts to open up possibilities for prisoners to dream, imagine, and see beyond the physically and psychologically crushing confines of a cage. It seeks to oppose the fact that solitary confinement is a mode of incarceration that works to deaden the mind, body, and senses of its captives. Prisoners held in solitary confinement are by definition isolated from the social and physical world but also normative modes of seeing and experiencing life. The physical architecture of solitary confinement—a

six-by-eight-foot cell one inhabits for twenty-three hours a day—produces hallucinations, memory loss, blindness, and other forms of pathologized perception.⁸ Most prisoners held in control units will never see the horizon, the night sky, or touch another human being. Many prisoners have lived in these “breathing coffins” for decades—an indefinite death in life.⁹ Eddie Griffin, a prisoner held in solitary confinement at the federal prison in Marion, Illinois, writes:

The cell itself contains a flat steel slab jutting from the wall. Overlaying the slab is a one-inch piece of foam wrapped in coarse plastic. This is supposed to be a bed. Yet it cuts so deeply into the body when one lays on it, that the body literally reeks with pain. After a few days, you are totally numb. Feelings become indistinct, emotions unpredictable. The monotony makes thoughts hard to separate and capsule. The eyes grow weary of the scene, and shadows appear around the periphery, causing sudden reflexive action. Essentially, the content of a man’s mind is the only means to defend his sanity.¹⁰

Solitary confinement, according to Griffin, is, of course, a mode of bodily incapacitation, but it also seeks to capture the very senses of the captive. Feelings blur, skin numbs, vision dulls; monotony makes thinking impossible. Solitary confinement works to regulate and discipline the affects and vision of the captive—the prisoner’s feelings, bodily intensities, and sight become the object of the prison’s power. In other words, the prison not only targets the body and soul of the prisoner, as Foucault famously observed, but also her emotions, affects, and perceptions.¹¹ The significance of *Photo Requests from Solitary* lies in this simple fact: the prisoner’s non-normativities make her a threat to the prison state, and one way this threat is regulated is by controlling and abolishing her ability to perceive the world. Why deny a person sight of the horizon, the stars, and trees for hours, days, months, and years? Why lock someone in an underground white room until her eyesight dulls?¹² Until she sees shadows where there is only whiteness? Until she forgets the feeling of a breeze and the smell of fresh air? Until she loses her balance because she doesn’t know the difference between the floor and the ceiling? Why force death on a still-breathing body?

What does the prisoner see and feel that is so dangerous to the racial state? What queer dreams and visions does the prisoner have that must be targeted for eradication?

By targeting the senses, incarceration and solitary confinement also contort and distort them. Prisoners in solitary confinement experience chronic rage, claustrophobia, heart palpitations, depression, the blunting of affect, dizziness, visual disturbances, and weight loss (SC, 14–16). Captivity also produces insomnia, daily panic attacks, obsessive focus on dying or being killed, inability to concentrate, the forced reliving of past forms of sexual violence caused by “humiliating and physically injurious body search procedures,” nonstop hallucinations, and ongoing fear of mental breakdown.¹³ These states of psychic and physical duress make it so that the walls of the prison whisper, scream, vibrate, and close in; cement, steel, and space become animated by the necropolitical institutionality of the prison. Prisoners become unhinged from reality—objects move, walls melt, space contracts.¹⁴ Lisa Guenther calls this “ontological derangement” (SC, 166). In this way, the prison not only produces non-normative genders and sexualities but also non-normative bodies and minds. It captures queer bodies and shuts down queer ways of being, but it also produces queer experiences of space and time. The prisoner’s dream emerges from this experience of state violence, where time stops and space constricts. Guenther describes the effects of solitary confinement and its relationship to the sight and imagination of the prisoner:

What would it be like to have one’s bodily contact with others reduced to the fastening and unfastening of restraints, punctuated with the intimate probing of the surface and depths of one’s body? Not to be able to speak to anyone except through the intercom or by yelling through the slot in the door? To be kept in solitude and yet exposed to constant surveillance and to the echoing noise of other prisoners? What would it be like to be prevented from having a concrete experience of open, unrestricted space? Not to see the sky or the horizon for days, weeks, even years on end? Not to know if it’s day or night apart from the schedule of one’s feedings and allotted exercise times? It is impossible to imagine. (SC, 164)



Fig. 2. *Trash Can Rolling Down a Hill*. Photo by Shannon Lee.
Courtesy of Tamms Year Ten.

Many prisoners held in solitary confinement describe the above experiences as akin to death: solitary confinement is “a white tomb,” an “existential death,” akin to being “buried alive.”¹⁵ When George Jackson wrote in 1970 that “capture is the closest thing to being dead that one is likely to experience in this life,” he was not being hyperbolic or poetic.¹⁶ He was articulating the historical fact that the modus operandi of the temporality of incarceration, and the prison itself, is to produce premature death.

The prisoner’s relationship to death has profound consequences for how imprisoned people experience time and space. This intimacy with death queers normative temporalities and acts as the condition of possibility for the queer demands articulated in *Photo Requests from Solitary*. For Muñoz, the non-normative temporalities central to queerness escape the crushing weight of “straight time” with its temporal structure of school, work, family, reproduction, marriage, and death (CU, 185). We can extend Muñoz’s

understanding of queer time by noting, as Regina Kunzel has shown, that the prison has been one of the central institutions that regulates modern temporality and sexuality.¹⁷ The prisoner inhabits a queer time and place where he is expunged from gender and sexual normativity through racialized discourses of immorality, pathology, deviance, and abnormality. The racialized position of the prisoner is always already sexually deviant and perverse and this figure inhabits the queer time of the prison's regime of discipline. In short, the prisoner exists in a queer temporality that acts as the constitutive underside to the normativities that guide straight time. By seeing beyond the time and space of the cell, the photos in *Photo Requests from Solitary* queer the visual horizons produced by solitary confinement.

The centrality of death to incarceration undoes normative modes of temporality so that the prisoner is subjected to a space that is timeless. Indeed, the carceral state's dream of the prisoner's future is one of incapacitation, slow death, and nothingness. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues, the prison no longer attempts to redeem the future of the captive.¹⁸ The prisoner's future is restricted to the endless dead time of the present. This politics of time is evident in the request for the photo titled *Trash Can Rolling Down a Hill*: "At 66 yrs. of age I try to use a little humor: I want a picture of a trash can with the lid half off + on and 2 eyes peeking out of the half open lid as the trash can is rolling down the hill toward an incinerator with the caption: 'I seem to be picking up speed I must be headed towards a bright future.'"¹⁹ In an era when the prison's function is to incapacitate millions of racialized and gendered bodies—turning them into waste in the trash can that is a cell—this request and image name the prison's temporality of the future as one of premature death. The photo can be understood as arguing that the forward movement called "progress" is used to push power to the edge of the frame, so that all one sees is blue sky and green grass. In response, it asks the viewer to envision what lies beyond this forcefully imposed normative frame, to look for the futures hidden where we cannot see or refuse to look. It reminds us that the prison limits, determines, and shapes what we see and how

we know. To queer sight and knowledge is to see that a future with prisons is no future at all.

In his writing from solitary confinement, Griffin similarly describes how the state organizes the sight and time of the captive:

In the control unit, a prisoner only does two things: recreate and shower. Only one range of men (18 out of 72) is allowed to work. Although everyone recognizes that the work is exploitative, it is generally considered a privilege. The rest of the control unit prisoners spend 23 1/2 hours a day locked in their cells. According to what state the man's mind is in, he may read or write. He sees the Control Unit Committee for about thirty seconds once a month to receive a decision on his "adjustment rating." He may see a case-worker to get papers notarized, the counselor to get an administrative remedy (complaint) form, and a phone call authorization (on a "maybe" basis). He may see the educational supervisor for books. Other than that, he deteriorates. ("BMM," 7)

For Griffin, the time of captivity is one of deterioration. The temporality of slow death that structures the day-to-day of incarceration is managed by the state, controlling and restricting any fugitive modes of life possible from a cage. Social life is deadened by restricted access to the minor socialities available inside and beyond the prison; thought is managed by regulating access to books; vision is dulled by a lack of space and by florescent lights that never turn off. One can write only if one can still think. To see another time and place, to see something somewhere else, is to refuse the racial state's attempt to capture the mind, body, and senses of the prisoner. The act of imagining "opens up an *elsewhere* and an *otherwise* within our current situation; it allows us to transpose ourselves into another place and time, another social position, another subjectivity" (sc, 165). Understanding this process of seeing beyond the violence of the present as a kind of queer politics helps us identify the normativizing forms of knowledge that support the racialized carceral state. It also points to a place beyond the prison and its regimes of violence.

Escaping the Frame

In *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, John Tagg argues that in the mid-nineteenth century the portrait provided a way of making visible the individual and ascribing a classed social identity onto the subject: “To ‘have one’s portrait done’ was one of the symbolic acts by which individuals from the rising social classes made their ascent visible to themselves and others and classed themselves as those who enjoyed social status.”²⁰ As photographing technology became more affordable and convenient, the portrait became central to emerging strategies of surveillance and incarceration, so that “it was no longer a privilege to be pictured but the burden of a new class of the surveilled” (BR, 59). The camera was thought of as an “apparatus of insight” that could make visible on the body’s surface what skin and facial features sometimes refuse to divulge: the inner truths of the mind and soul.²¹ Photography became critical to the production of new forms of knowledge about race, sexuality, gender, criminality, and the body, and thus became foundational to new apparatuses of racialized state surveillance, control, and population management.

As the racial state, the prison, and capital expanded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the camera became a technology of epistemological and bodily capture, rendering the photograph a record of a “wordless power” that measured, numbered, named, and arrested workers, vagrants, criminals, patients, the poor, the enslaved, and the colonized (BR, 64). By documenting spaces and populations illegible to the state’s regimes of knowing and governance, the camera aided the modern state in creating a system of visibility and legibility available to policing and control. The modern state’s aim is to contain the disorderly, chaotic, always changing social order within its purview into a reflection of the administrative knowledge central to its governance. The state works to produce temporal and spatial intelligibility in order to manufacture the orderly administration and regulation of the nation’s population, resources, and infrastructure.²² Thus, the camera and the photograph became tools for inscribing a racialized and gendered truth onto the criminalized body. The captured body was



Fig. 3. *My mother in front of a mansion.* Photo by Jeanine Oleson. Courtesy of Tamms Year Ten.

subjected to an “unreturnable gaze” that isolated, illuminated, and sharpened it, so that gestures, faces, and features could be scrutinized for an inner truth that only the camera’s lens could make visible (*BR*, 85).

We can place Tagg’s analysis of prison photography as a class project central to the emergence of industrial capitalism within the history of what Loïc Wacquant has called the “carceral continuum.”²³ This anti-black formation was foundational to the formation of the US state during the twentieth century. Wacquant argues that the prison is part of a racialized apparatus of necropolitical control that traverses time (slavery, the convict-lease system, Jim Crow, and the early ghetto) and space (the prison, schools, welfare, and the hyper-ghetto) to manage and contain populations rendered surplus or disposable to the racial state and (neoliberal) capital. In this way, an anti-blackness established under chattel slavery possesses and structures a variety of institutions over space and time.²⁴ Visions of photographic “truth” came to rely on the force of the racialized imagination—an imagination animated by the ways that “the afterlife of slavery” structured the political ontology of black-

ness as criminal.²⁵ This process also included the construction and development of normative notions of gender and sexuality that were formed in concert with modern notions of race.²⁶ Thus, the photograph became one document of normativity and its accompanying forms of racialized, gendered, and sexual abnormality, deviance, and perversion. Within this context, the photograph of the prisoner/captive became structured by the protocols of a system of racialized and gendered management, control, and governance.

Photo Requests from Solitary challenges the politics of truth, visibility, and knowledge surrounding the captive body and thus subverts the state's attempt to control and silence the imprisoned. Many of the pieces in the exhibit challenge the truth represented by the photograph by cutting and pasting multiple images together to make the impossible, possible. While I call them photographs for the sake of brevity, we might think of them as a "word-text image-dreams."²⁷ For example, the image *My mother in front of a mansion* overturns the historical function of the camera's disciplinary power by using it to imagine a scene where the dispossessed have wealth and abundance impossible under contemporary formations of power. The requester asked for an image of "my mother standing in front of a mansion, or Big Castle, with a bunch of money on the ground. OR if you can't do that, THEN a substitution is a big mansion or castle with a bunch of money in front of it and a black hummer parked in front of it. I truly appreciate this a lot. . . . Now I know somebody out there in the world cares about us in here."²⁸ This impossible queer dream of a world where an imprisoned man's mother lives in a castle, drives a Hummer, and has piles of money challenges the normative order of the world. In addition, the requester notes the power of the relationality between artist and captive—"somebody . . . cares about us in here"—a process that challenges the social death of isolation and imprisonment. This process requires forging queer connections: care and love are extended to people coded as worthless, expendable, and forgettable. Remembering them, dreaming with them, and caring for them upsets a racialized and gendered normative order that defines what is thinkable and who is valuable.

Within the prisoner's dream, the camera and photograph are not technologies of state control but rather technologies central to a perceptual politics of escape. For the prisoners held in Tamms Correctional Center, a request could open up new ways of seeing, knowing, and imaging the world, creating an escape from the disciplinary function of the frame and the affective violence of the prison. Many of the photos included in *Photo Requests from Solitary* are of beaches, families, old neighborhoods, and free-world activists involved in the struggle to end solitary confinement at Tamms. However, a number of prisoners requested the alteration of their prison-issued IDs so that they appear as though they are no longer incarcerated. For example, one prisoner's request, *A Photo Within a Photo of Me*, describes the process of capture and escape that takes place through the photograph:

PHOTO REQUEST: A PHOTO WITHIN A PHOTO OF ME
 5 [copies]. A photograph within a photo of me + the lake front.
 5 [copies]. A photograph within a photo of me + Navy Pier.
 5 [copies]. A photograph within a photo of me + wild lions.
 5 [copies]. A photograph within a photo of me + wild wolves.
 5 [copies]. A photograph within a photo of me + Chinese Dragon.
 For next Christmas mailing of cards. Additional instructions:
 Yes, please place me in the right, upper corner of the photos
 within a photo + make copies of them 5 each. Thank you very
 much + many blessings ♥. Get my photo off the Tamms prison
 profile website. (PRS)

Similarly, the request for *Myself!* (not pictured here) reads, "I would like to have a picture of myself! The only picture I've had of me is my ID and that's been since 1996" (PRS). In order to fulfill the request, photographer Greg Broseus cut and copied the head of the prisoner from the prison-issued ID and pasted it onto two different photos: one on the body of a man in a suit and another on the body of shirtless man at a beach. By placing the photo of the imprisoned in another time and place, the above request works to negate the power of the carceral state to determine the meaning of the captive body. In another photo, *My Picture with a Blue Sky*, the requester writes:



Fig. 4. *A Photo Within a Photo of Me*. Photo by Kate Joyce.
Courtesy of Tamms Year Ten.

I would like my own picture done with an alternate background from the [Illinois Department of Corrections] picture. I have no pictures of myself to give my friends and family. This would mean a great deal to me. If this is not able to be done. Then I'll leave the picture for you to decide. Additional instructions: If you can place my picture on another background. Nothing too much please. Something simple like a blue sky with clouds or a sunset in the distance would be fine. (PRS)

In this photo the prisoner attempts to symbolically escape solitary confinement by imagining another time and place he longs for, has never seen, and may never see. The photo works to symbolically and affectively rewrite “the very texture of reality” by helping the requester to see and feel something different.²⁹

The prison uses the camera to make the prisoner's body visible to its regimes of knowledge. Each scar, the length of limbs, the shape of the face, eye color, and the texture of hair are mobilized to force the imprisoned body to subject itself to the violence of the prison—to submit to its regimes of meaning making (PV, 116). The

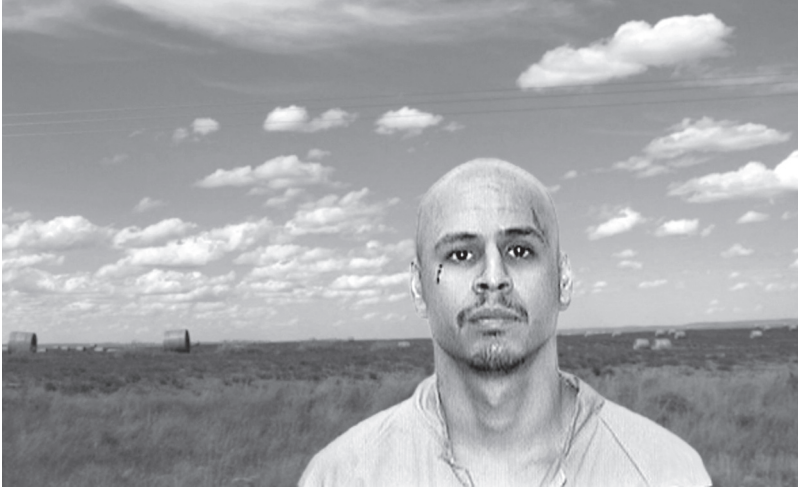


Fig. 5. *My Picture with a Blue Sky*. Photo by Laurie Jo Reynolds and Chris X. Courtesy of Tamms Year Ten.

prisoner is dispossessed from her body not only by the physical and psychological terror of incarceration but also by its representational regimes. Indeed, representation becomes a way to manage and control unruly subjects by making them visible and legible to systems of regulation.³⁰ Because of the “ontologizing affects of the photochemical” that turn the photographic into flesh, the imprisoned lose hold over the meaning of their bodies—the camera and photograph force prisoners to effectively turn themselves in (*RF*, 69). However, *A Photo Within a Photo of Me, Myself!*, and *My Picture with a Blue Sky* escape the prison’s regimes of representation and thereby challenge the prison’s hold on meaning, opening a passageway to other epistemologies—ones that leave the goals of solitary confinement unfulfilled. These pieces help us to envision a space and time where the prisoner can be more than a dehumanized and pathologized object of the state. By manipulating the prison-issued ID photos, they disrupt the technologies used to arrest, capture, and manage the bodies of those rendered surplus, considered rebellious, or constructed as deviant and perverse to the normativities that guide the operation of the neoliberal-carceral state.³¹

In these images the prisoner feels and senses the world in ways

made impossible by solitary confinement. The images pierce through a racialized and gendered visual field so that representation as capture becomes representation as escape (*RF*, 68). The prisoners inhabit space from which they have been banished. These photoshopped portraits attempt to raise the socially dead and bring them back to the world of the sun, sky, and water. The racialized violence that thus constitutes the idyllic minimalism of the American pastoral, untouched by the prisoner, is made visible when the captive body moves to the center of the frame. The imprisoned make a visual claim on the world and thus rearrange dominant ways of seeing. By using the very photographs—the prison-issued IDs—that detain and monitor the prisoners to open up modes of unauthorized thought and perception, these pieces not only name photography as central to the operation of the carceral state, but also use photography as “modes of exodus,” leading to places and times beyond normative temporalities and epistemologies (*CU*, 177). The photos open up an impossible space between the forms of subjection produced by the disciplinary frame and a place where prisoners are free from the state power that brings them into being and refuses to let go.³² What I am calling the prisoner’s dream attempts to grasp at this impossibility—one that rests between the discipline of the camera, the terror of the cell, the cut in the frame, and the dreams of the living dead.

The dreams and visions of *Photo Requests from Solitary* embody what Avery Gordon calls “the prisoner’s curse.” For Gordon, “the curse delivers to you a vision of your own deathly existence laid bare,” because “the prisoner’s fate is always bound up with those of us who are not yet captured, regardless of whether this relation is acknowledged.”³³ The prisoner’s curse is a response to the social death created in the name of life, freedom, and justice. It responds to social death by asserting a life force that demands, “I am not what you say I am.”³⁴ The prisoner’s curse is a method for the living dead to show the living what we stand on. It shows that normative modes of subjectivity require the desubjectification of others we cannot and will not know, rendering them usable, expendable, and dead.³⁵ These photos name the death of solitary confinement by highlighting what it denies and destroys: access

to the social world, the world of the senses. They connect social death to the free world by inserting the picture of the captive into the frame of “normal life.”³⁶ They show how solitary confinement steals life and creates so many living deaths, and they demand that normative epistemologies that naturalize incarceration allow for an envisioning of prisoners in places they cannot be, if only for a moment. They ask the viewer to be haunted by the people the prison has stolen. In this way, the prisoner’s curse is a type of subjugated knowledge that can alter the course of events. It can send reality reeling in unexpected directions, sending the time of progress to unimaginable places. It is a way of ensuring that regardless of whether anyone is listening, no one will ever forget that “your world is dead” (“MI,” 655).

But the photos in *Photo Requests from Solitary* are not only a series of curses; they are also dreams, desires, and demands. For example, *A Photo Within a Photo of Me* attempts to see beyond the ways that the social and living death of incarceration capture the past, present, and future of blackness. It grasps at a somewhere and a something beyond the state’s determination of what is real and true. In addition to asking for his picture to be resignified with lions, dragons, wolves, the lakefront, and Navy Pier, the requester also wanted his photo removed from the Tamms prison website. His request thereby steals back the “wordless power” of the photograph and sends it to places rendered unthinkable for the prisoner (BR, 64). This request seeks to use photography to transport the mind and body of the captive beyond the social and living death of the prison, even as it also demonstrates that photography is a technology central to his capture. It issues a curse, but it also embodies a dream.

The Prisoner’s Dream

The prisoner’s dream is a dream of escape, but escape means more than getting out. Escape is not the absence of limits and prohibitions foundational to liberal conceptions of freedom.³⁷ Escape is perceptual, visual, epistemological, and affective. The prisoner’s dream is a methodology to think, feel, and see beyond the prison

and its carceral commonsense. Within the prisoner's dream, the prison's unfreedom shapes the contours of the world so that release is not enough. For the requester of *Space where the Robert Taylor Homes used to be*, there is no home to return to, no outside to the prison's power. For him, the prison has left nothingness in its wake. Release from prison means entering a world still marked by its power and determined by a seemingly endless apparatus of capture. The prison is more than an institution composed of cages, corridors, and guard towers; it is also a system of affects, desires, discourses, and ideas that make the prison possible. The prison could disappear tomorrow, but the types of power that give rise to its reign would live on. Escape doesn't mean getting out; it means remaking the order of the world out of new ontologies and epistemologies that change the fashioning of life and death (*ER*, 61). The queerness of the prisoner's dream is more than a counter-discourse or reaction to the operations of power (*CU*, 177). Instead, it gestures toward something that exceeds dominant epistemologies. For example, the request for the photo *My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle* describes the haunting absence of the prisoner from a time and place beyond captivity:

I would love a photograph of a woman setting by a lake fishing, with an empty chair next to her, with a cooler of beer. And in the empty chair have a sign with FreeBird on it! And have a Harley Davidson motorcycle in the background! Additional instructions: I'd prefer the photographer take the photo from a boat out in the lake! Also, I'd prefer a woman that's over 40! ("vs")

Unlike *My Picture with a Blue Sky*, which filled an empty space with the presence of the captive body, *My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle* and *Space where the Robert Taylor Homes used to be* call attention to emptiness left behind by the carceral state, noting that somewhere an empty place is waiting. The empty chair waiting to be filled is the mark of the prison's power. Yet the empty space of *My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle* is different from the vacant lot of *Space where the Robert Taylor Homes used to be*. *My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle* documents the violence of incarceration



Fig. 6. *My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle*.
Photo by Sun Woo. Courtesy of Tamms Year Ten.

while simultaneously dreaming of a place beyond the prison. This empty place inhabits not only the here and now but also a place and time we do not know. It is an absence to run toward, akin to Muñoz's utopia of "something different, something better, something dawning," but also of something missing (*CU*, 189).

My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle demonstrates that an ongoing process of "revelation and obfuscation" is central to the visual politics of photography and the prison regime (*AE*, 215). Photography can make the "invisible visible, showing us what we ordinarily don't see," thereby demonstrating how normative modes of seeing and knowing render so much unseen and unthought (*AE*, 215). *My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle* forces the viewer to confront a scene that is normally outside the frame of what is thought. In this way, it shows the forms of disappearance that make normativity and normal life possible, because "What you cannot see, and cannot remember, is part of a larger geographic project that thrives on forgetting and displacing blackness."³⁸ By placing imprisoned people in places they cannot inhabit—a field, a beach, their childhood playground—the

exhibit draws attention to how spaces of freedom are made possible by the disappearance of millions of people into the US prison regime. Within this visual regime, the unseen, the unthought, and the unknown produce the visible, the thinkable, and the knowable. In response, the exhibit asks, How can we bring people back and ensure they are never taken again? How can the world be reordered so that there is no longer an empty chair by a lake?

The utopic vision embedded in *My Empty Chair by Lake with Woman and Motorcycle* is powerful because it is familiar in its banality but ultimately impossible in its demand. Sitting by a lake fishing with a beer, a motorcycle, and “a woman that’s over 40” is not a dream of a utopia unrecognizable in its alterity from the horrors of the present. Indeed, the power of the photos in *Photo Requests from Solitary* does not reside in their explicit utopic demands of a world beyond capital, captivity, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. The photos do not accompany revolutionary manifestos or a list of radical demands. Rather, the impossibility of the dreams, demands, and desires embodied in the requests and the photos lies in their banality and simplicity. There is a world-shattering force embodied in someone living a death in life asking to see the street he grew up on, *My Picture with Blue Sky*, or *My Mother in Front of a Mansion*. In this way, even as *Photo Requests from Solitary* shows how imagination animates technologies of capture like the photograph, making some truths visible and others unseen, it also allows one to see more, “to see the gap . . . to see the dark, in-between spaces” where fantasy, pleasure, and impossibility are also embedded in the frame of the photograph (AE, 98).

For these requests to become a reality beyond the photograph, the entire organization of the world would need to change. The photos are simple in their profundity and quiet in their desire and ability to see behind the impossible weight of cement and steel. For the scene of someone sitting by a lake fishing to take form—a scene that looks familiar and possible—the stated ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality must be decoupled from a world that needs the prison. A world that tastes freedom in the incapacitation of black and brown bodies, that feels liberation in the textures of subjection, that turns living death into justice, needs to disappear altogether.

I want to end not with the prisoner's curse but with the prisoner's dream. Unlike a curse, a dream does not concern itself with the life of the captor. A dream sidesteps the future of a world that is dead and tries to imagine a place and time that can leave the prison behind. Like queerness as a force that insists on a time and place that is unknown and unthought, a dream leaves behind the rules and conventions of the world and runs toward the unimaginable and impossible. Queerness, in this formulation, takes flight from the non-normative to escape "closed economies of societal meaning" produced by white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, neoliberalism, and the carceral state (QF, 147). It can be hard to recognize queerness when it exceeds the body or sexuality, because its possibilities are excessive, illegible, and impossible. But the hope of queerness lies in this illegibility—its attempt to escape what is always tracking it down, always working toward its capture. And so, for queerness to grasp at the utopic it must follow the dreams, visions, and epistemologies of the prisoner. It might lead to an empty lot left by the violence of the carceral state, a cornfield, or an "imaginative picture of beach, palm trees and colorful birds," but like queerness, the prisoner's dream imagines something familiar yet new, grounded yet disorienting, utopic but already here. The prisoner's dream demands recognition of the violence of the now and paints a vision of something and somewhere else, a place where the prison's hold on our feelings, desires, and imaginations is left behind—even if it's just the "Stone archway I used to play on in Back of the Yards" ("vs").

Notes

1. Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 6. Hereafter cited as *AE*.
2. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism," *Race and Class* 40, nos. 2-3 (1998-9): 171-88. For more on this transition see Loïc Wacquant, "The Penalization of Poverty and the Rise of Neoliberalism," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 9 (2001): 401-12; Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham: Duke University

- Press, 2009); Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Prisons and Policing in an Age of Crises* (London: Verso, 1999); and Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). On the biopolitics of homelessness see Craig Willse, “Neoliberal Biopolitics and the Invention of Chronic Homelessness,” *Economy and Society* 39, no. 2 (May 2010): 155–84.
3. Lorna Rhodes, *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), hereafter cited as *SC*.
 4. “How to Take a Photo for Someone in Solitary Confinement,” *Tamms Year Ten*, accessed January 2, 2014. The images from *Photo Requests from Solitary* (hereafter cited as *PRS*) were available online in 2014 at the Tamms Year Ten website; they are no longer active. For more on Tamms Year Ten visit <http://tammsyearten.mayfirst.org>.
 5. “Photo Requests from Solitary,” *Photoville*, accessed January 3, 2014, <http://photovillennyc.org/photoville-2013/photo-requests-from-solitary/>.
 6. “List of Photo Requests from Solitary,” *Tamms Year Ten*, accessed January 3, 2014, link no longer active. See note 4.
 7. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1. Hereafter cited as *CU*.
 8. Richard Korn, “The Effects of Confinement in the High Security Unit at Lexington,” *Social Justice* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 8–19.
 9. Alan Eladio Gómez, “Resisting Living Death at Marion Federal Petitionary, 1972,” *Radical History Review* 96 (Fall 2006): 61.
 10. Eddie Griffin, “Breaking Men’s Minds: Behavior Control and Human Experimentation at the Federal Prison in Marion,” *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 4, no. 2 (1993): 7. Hereafter cited as “BMM.”
 11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 125–28.
 12. In the late 1980s, Susan Rosenberg and other political prisoners were held in solitary confinement in an all-white underground prison in Lexington, Kentucky. For the full account of her time there, see Susan Rosenberg, *American Radical: A Political Prisoner in My Own Country* (New York: Citadel Press Books, 2011).
 13. Richard Korn, “Follow Up Report on the Effects of Confinement in

- the High Security Unit at Lexington,” *Social Justice* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 25–26.
14. Lisa Guenther, “Subjects without a World? An Husserlian Analysis of Solitary Confinement,” *Human Studies* 34 (2011): 259.
 15. Mary O’Melveny, “Portrait of a U.S. Political Prison—The Lexington High Security Unit for Women,” in *Cages of Steel: The Politics of Imprisonment in the United States*, ed. Ward Churchill and J. J. Vander Wall (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1992), 112–22.
 16. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 19–20.
 17. Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1–5.
 18. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulags: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5–20.
 19. “Visions from Solitary: Prisoners’ Imaginations Made Real by Activists’ Photographs,” *Prison Photography*, accessed February 22, 2015, <http://prisonphotography.org/2012/11/19/views-from-solitary-prisoners-imaginations-made-real-by-activists-photographs>. Hereafter cited as “vs.”
 20. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 37. Hereafter cited as *BR*.
 21. Suren Lalvani, *Photography, Vision, and the Production of Modern Bodies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 49–50. Hereafter cited as *PV*.
 22. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 82.
 23. Loïc Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment and Society* 31, no. 1 (2001): 97.
 24. For more on time, slavery, and incarceration, see Dennis Childs, “‘You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet’: *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 2009): 271–97; Stephen Dillon, “Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Radical History Review* 112 (Winter 2012): 113–25; Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
 25. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic*

- Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6; Jared Sexton, "People of Color Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 103 (Summer 2010): 31–56.
26. For more on race and sexuality, see Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Siobhan Sommerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
 27. I thank the *Qui Parle* editorial board for this phrasing.
 28. "Photo requests from solitary," *Al Jazeera America*, accessed February 22, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/30/photo-requests-fromsolitary.html>.
 29. Alessandra Raengo, *Race as Face Value: On the Sleeve of the Visual* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 68. Hereafter cited as *RF*.
 30. Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson, and Vassilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 56. Hereafter cited as *ER*.
 31. Beth E. Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 112–18.
 32. John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 177.
 33. Avery Gordon, "Methodologies of Imprisonment," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 652–55. Hereafter cited as "MI."
 34. Avery Gordon, "The Prisoner's Curse," in *Toward a Sociology of the Trace*, ed. Herman Grey and Macarena Gómez-Barris (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 46.
 35. Judith Butler and Anthena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 27.
 36. Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law* (Boston: South End Press, 2011), 22.
 37. Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 119. Hereafter cited as *QF*.
 38. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 33.