

# Black Box

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A RECORD OF THE CATASTROPHE

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VOLUME ONE



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Tisa Bryant Nina Power Tanya Erzen Miranda Mellis Kshama Sawant Charles Mudede

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**EDITED BY THE BLACK BOX COLLECTIVE**

That things are “status quo” is the catastrophe.

—*Walter Benjamin*

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The Black Box Collective emerged after several years of symposia, reading groups, summer camps, wood-splitting, and barn-raising. The poets, journalists, academics, metaphysicians, artists, and strategists of the collective gather regularly at a retired dairy farm in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains north of Seattle to explore consciousness, community, and the circulation of communizing/commonizing currents. *Black Box: A Record of the Catastrophe* is our first attempt to assemble a critique that might awaken us from the dream world that is so efficiently reproduced by capitalist culture.

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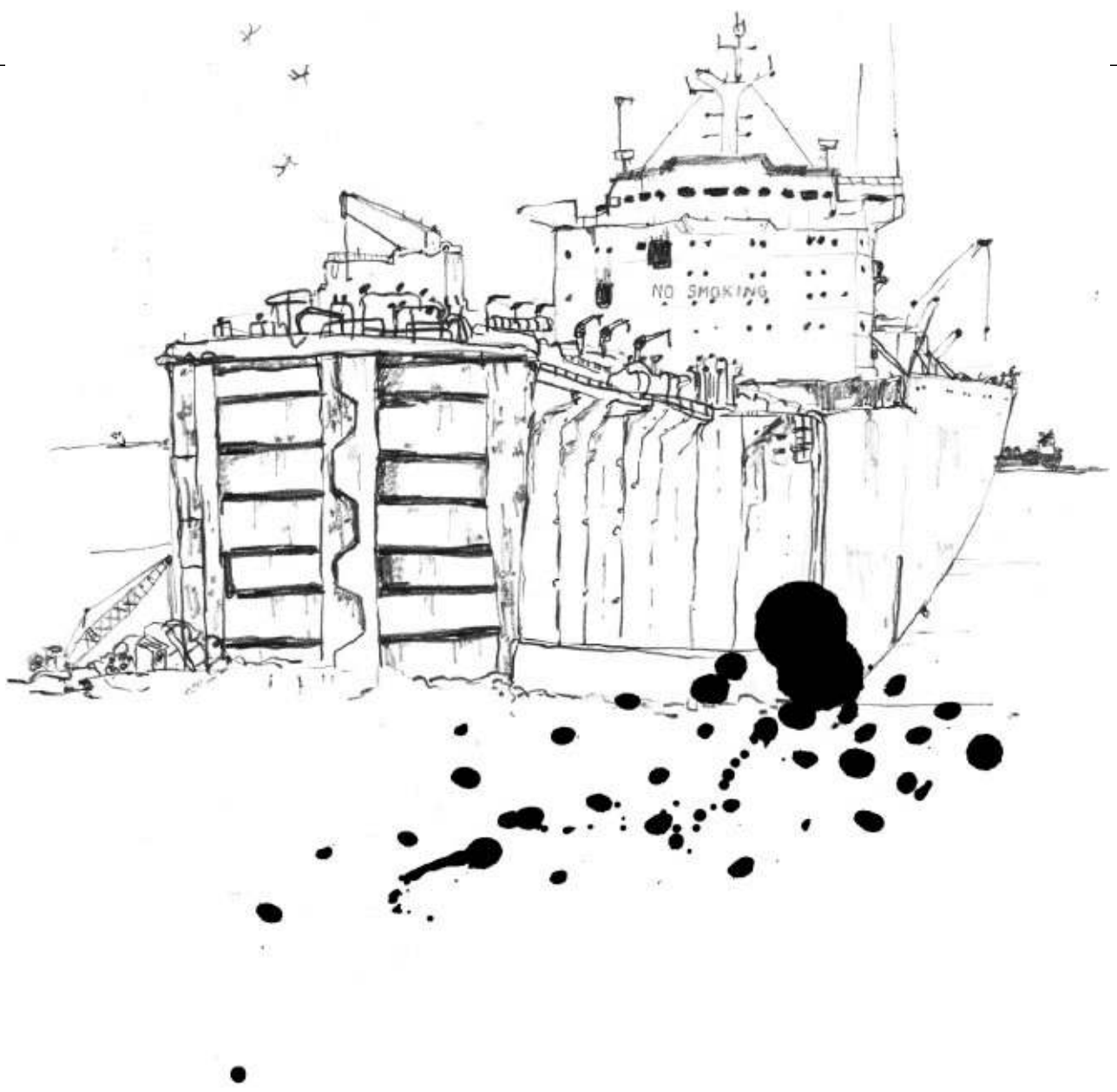
*Nina Power*

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**Encyclopedia of the Catastrophe**

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# The Weight of All Those Machines

PETER WIEBEN

There are many men there, thousands of them. But they do not weigh as much as the machines. The men are crawling all over the ships. The ships have been pulled out of the water using big winches that are sunk into the sand on the beach. The winches alone outweigh the men. They pull the ships up onto shore, then the men are released to swarm them. They cut them to pieces with oxygen torches and acetylene torches. The pieces they cut fall off and are very large. Sometimes, the pieces are as big as buildings. The fat man, the owner of lot 161, told us that five men die in Alang each year. Will sensed that he was lying, and I did too.

Once the pieces are on shore, they are dragged up the beach by the men. Sometimes the machines help. The pieces are just slices of ship. Sometimes, the slices come from the front of the ship, like bread slices. Other times, the slices come from the sides, like turkey slices. Either way, they must be picked apart.

It is interesting to see what is inside a big ship like that. I got to look right inside. I could see the rooms. Sometimes the plumbing is visible, or stairs. Sometimes the insulation is. Will told me that one reason the number of deaths is higher than five is because there are no masks or filters in the ship-breaking yard. Whatever comes out of the ship, if it is not scrap metal or something usable (like a lifejacket), is set on fire.

Sometimes an oil tanker arrives. In these cases, the tanker is cut open on shore and the oil spills out. That is why the Alang coast is brown. I thought that anyway, and I told Will. Will told me that the coast is always brown in India, not just in Alang. I walked down to the mud and smelled it. It smelled like shit. Will told me that is because the workers do not have any plumbing in their homes.

Will is a factory worker from Tulsa, Oklahoma. For this reason, he was more adjusted to the environment of the Alang ship-breaking yard. For example, when we approached the ships, after we were frisked and interrogated a little, we walked over a piece of metal that was being cut by two men wearing no shoes. The cutting was happening with what was either an oxygen torch or an acetylene torch. The sparks were quite hot, but we walked right through them. There was very little air to breathe. The smoke, combined with the chemicals, the exhaust of the machines, and the stinking ocean made so I hated my own breathing. Will said that was normal. I was unable to cover my mouth with my shirt because I was supposed to be a hardened factory worker like Will and not just some idiot with a notebook.

I saw a worker there and I told Will that he couldn't be older than 15. Will said that was bad. But then he told me that he started work in a foundry when he was 17. It wasn't good, he said, but he really couldn't judge.

Later, we stood underneath a crane that was handling a large piece of a ship. It was swinging over our heads. I was nervous to be beneath this piece of ship. The piece was bigger than a van. I was afraid the piece would fall and crush us, but again Will said this was fairly normal. The ship they were breaking was Japanese. It was constructed in 1999.

I asked Will if he thought human rights abuses were happening in the shipyard in Alang. I told him that I had read in many newspapers that these ship-breaking yards were the scene of human rights

abuses. In fact, I believed that I had seen some with my own eyes. Will said he didn't really think so. He said the pay was better here than in many parts of India. Besides, he said, the conditions were not that much worse here than in the average factory. The reason the shipyards were big news was because Westerners felt guilty that their ships were being broken up here.

We sat with the owner of lot 161. His face was so round and so pudgy that his eyes were really squinty and gangster-looking. I do not know if he was actually evil, though. While we were with him, I received a delivery which he unwrapped and passed around for Will and me to look at. The delivery was a very ornate box. The box was made of very fine wood and had beautiful engravings all around it. Inside of the box was a book with what looked like original Persian miniatures on it. They depicted a king with his entourage. The king was on a horse. Inside the book was a wedding invitation. "Save the date, only," the fat man said.

The fat man was wearing a gold watch and had tea delivered to us. I did not take any. I told the fat man's assistant that I was sick to my stomach. The assistant became afraid of angering the fat man, who rarely hosted foreign dignitaries such as ourselves. After all, foreigners could not be trusted in a place like Alang. They tended to leave and say nasty things about the operation there. They tended to distort the truth and exaggerate things like human rights abuses and environmental catastrophes. Foreigners were obsessed with Alang, the fat man said, because they did not understand it. We were seated on a veranda overlooking the struggling shipyard, which was teeming with workers. There was a noise like thunder from the next lot. A thick plume of smoke intermittently blew into my face. It was dark brown.



While we were sipping tea and examining this ornate box, two men were disassembling a cylinder that was composed of hundreds or thousands of greased-up pieces of wire. The wire was thick like rebar. Each piece was stuck through two circular metal plates. Heat exchanger, Will said. The men were removing each piece of wire by hand, but it was so greased up that their hands kept slipping. Each piece took them five minutes or so to remove. They were not even close to finishing. The cylinder was more

than a meter in diameter. The men had to strain a lot to remove the wires. Behind them, a group of seven men lifted one giant piece of scrap after the other into the bed of a large Indian dump truck. They lifted as a team, like this: "Ho! Ho! Hup!"

We drove along the beach at Alang to see how big the place was. It went on and on. For kilometers there was one giant ship after the other. I liked looking at these ships and seeing their inside but it was very depressing to consider that each of these lots had a fat man, an ornate box, and men pulling wires out of cylinders. Each lot had a tall gate and a mean-looking man in front of it to keep out people such as ourselves. The gates were painted with motivational messages such as "Clean Alang, Green Alang" or "Safety Is Our Motto."

Will loved to look at the big engines. They were bigger than a house. They were covered in valves and exhaust pipes big enough to walk through. "What happens to them?" I asked Will.

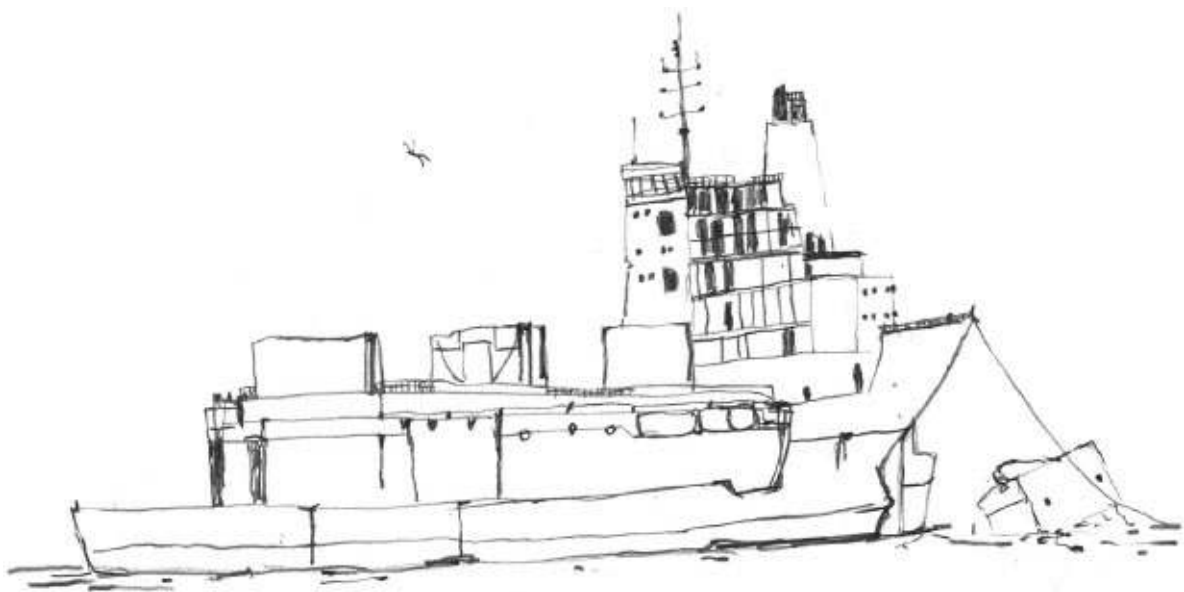
"Scrap."

We were not supposed to be in there. We didn't have a permit or anything. We were told that we could go to jail if we were caught.

Nowadays, the value of a big ship like that is only determined by its weight. The human labor and knowledge and design and so on are negligible to the price. That is how cheap human labor has become. Nowadays, things like ships are measured by the kilo. This is something the fat man explained to me, and we were standing beneath that crane, beneath that piece of ship that was bigger than a van.

The homes for the workers at Alang are made of plastic sheets and scraps of wood and tarps and so on. When they need to use the bathroom, they wander out into the ocean.

The ships are bought as is. That means that when they are hauled up on to shore, everything is still inside of them. The beds, the maps, the lockers, the exercise equipment, ropes, lifeboats, blenders, spoons, and so on are all still there. Outside Alang, there are open lots or rudimentary warehouses holding all of these things for sale. I saw a whole warehouse full of treadmills. Another was just couches. It was really amazing. All of these things were along one long road leading to the ships themselves and the brown beach. I measured the distance from one end of this road to the other, and the distance was six kilometers. On both sides of that road were continuous piles of ship stuff that reach higher than a house. I probably saw over one thousand blenders from all around the world.



Also with Will and me was the German intern. The German intern was interested in one day entering manufacturing or a related field. He, like Will, did not really seem to be disturbed by Alang.

The two of them ate a lot of food at a restaurant right outside the road with all of the stuff on it. I could not eat though.

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I told them that when I was a kid, I used to kill ants. I would squish their legs and then I would use a magnifying glass to cook them. The smaller my spot of sun, the better the ant would burn. It would pop and sizzle when it cooked and curl up as the ant got heated by the sun. "Yes," the German interloper said. "That is universal."

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Will is an engineer and he is pretty good at math and at figuring things out. I asked him after I returned from India whether he thought human beings weighed more or machines did. In other words, if you stacked up all humans on a scale, and then all machines, which one would be heavier?

"There are about 6 billion humans at about 60 kilos average," Will wrote to me. "That's 0.36 gigatons."

Will wrote that he read in a book by Vaclav Smil that humans use 1.5 gigatons of stuff each year just in order to "keep the 'human edifice' going. But that includes a lot of cement and sand and stuff."

He wrote that in his apartment, the machines he had weighed more than him. "Fridge, air conditioner, ghetto blaster, etc."

He wrote: "The total number of cars produced last year was 80 million. And the total number of humans in existence is now more than a billion. The average car weighs more than 1.5t. This means that cars alone outweigh humans by four times: 1.5 gigatons of cars vs 0.36 gt of humans."

As we were leaving Alang, there was a truck that was painted in orange, with dots of every color on it. It had paintings of eyes on its front, and on the back it was written: "All is All." The truck was being loaded with scrap, which would be melted in a furnace somewhere and turned into auto parts, machine parts, gears, and so on. The ships' ballasts, giant redwood trunks made of forged steel, were taken away to be turned on lathes for weeks, making them into molds for the pipes that run beneath our cities. The lathes turn in a workshop in Ahmedabad. It is nice there. It is peaceful. The hum of the lathes never stops, these big redwoods turn and turn, spiral-shaped steel shavings pile up on the floor, and the men wade around through those, carefully checking the slow progress of the molds. Then the molds are brought to factories and filled with liquid steel. Then more cities are built. And ships are made to supply them with all the things they need.

In Ahmedabad, Will and I went up in a hot air balloon. It was tethered to the ground by a steel cable, and the cable was controlled by a winch, which was bolted to the ground. We could see for miles. The city was full of cars and motorcycles and dump trucks and construction equipment. The buildings were all falling down and rebuilt as they fell, so signs and laundry lines came out at odd angles. Police in khaki uniforms used long sticks to control the traffic, beating the cars like sheep. Women dressed in the brightest colors. People piled into any kind of motorized transportation. There was a ring of smog around the city. Four industrial zones, all with hundreds of smoke stacks, released black lines that drifted the same way, out over the plain to the seaside. The industrial zones surrounded the city, so it always smelled like burning, even high up. "I hate to ask this," I told him, "but what do you think would happen if the cable broke? We would fly to space!"

Will laughed. "It wouldn't even make the news," he said.

I used to have this nightmare where I found myself standing inside of a giant mouth. The mouth was as big as the universe and was lined with sharp teeth pointing downwards. In the nightmare, I was holding onto a tooth and all around me, human bodies are falling down into the mouth. Millions

them, people from all over the world. I told Will about this. I said that was kind of the feeling I got when I was in Alang—that we were all falling down into some kind of abyss, and that it was completely out of our control to stop it. That it wasn't progress that was moving us, but gravity. I told him I needed a bit of time off from looking at machines.

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A few days later, we were drinking whiskey and Will and the German intern were discussing Alang. They said that it was not a humanitarian problem or an environmental problem. They said that like all these problems, it was an engineering problem. The solution to all of these machines, they kept insisting, was more machines.

I told them that I thought they were maniacs.

“Listen,” Will said. “I’ll draw it out.”

He proceeded to redesign Alang with locks for raising the ships and for holding in spilled oil. There were big cranes to hold up the ships and the ship pieces so they wouldn't fall and crush the workers. He put robotic torches on robotic cars on these same cranes to do the heavy cutting. He insisted that it would be quiet and clean. He said that humans would only have to push the buttons. It could be a good operation, he said. Clean and efficient and humane. It would even be cheaper than it is now. More profitable.

I looked at his drawing and I had to admit that it seemed like a very good idea. Much better than the way it was now.

“So why don't they do it?” I asked.

“Folks are just too busy whipping their workers to think about the numbers,” Will said. “Quite common.” ●



# What Is a Life in Angola Prison?

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TANYA ERZEN

You Are Entering the Land of New Beginnings  
—Sign on the entrance to Angola prison

Angola: Ain't No Place to Be  
—Quote on T-shirts worn by members of the  
Angola Lifers Association

John Floyd has been tending the peacocks since he arrived at his caretaker's shack at dawn. There are dozens of them roaming the expansive grounds, perched on trucks, reclining in tree branches, and pecking around the front porch of the ranch house. He's discovered a nest midway up the hill and he has to be canny in order to cajole the mother and her chicks down to the safety of the hutches and sheds he's built for them over the years. There are foxes, snakes, and whatever else could nab an unsuspecting peacock at night.

John knows each peacock, each guinea hen, each chicken, and each flower and plant because he has been here for 34 years. Now 64, a slight white man with a stoop and a squinty smile, he has spent his life in a prison the size of Manhattan—decades without ever seeing the outside world. He is one of 6,000 men who live in this former slave plantation and convict leasing farm, nicknamed Angola because the plantation owner believed the hardest slaves came from there.

Thanks to Louisiana's draconian criminal justice system, most of the over 4,000 men serving life sentences without the possibility of parole will die here. "We have more funerals than we have men going home," John explains. John is a lifer. He is one of the 1,000 or so "trustees," men who have inched their way to the upper echelons of the prison hierarchy after dozens of years. They are cooks in the warden's home, automotive mechanics, newspaper editors, radio DJs, cattle wranglers, horse trainers, preachers, heavy-machinery repairmen, cowboys who compete in Angola's yearly prison rodeo, and coffin-makers.



John sleeps in a prison camp called the Dog Pen with other trustees who raise bloodhounds and breed wolf/German shepherd hybrids—the wolves alone were not deemed vicious enough. They train the bloodhounds to hunt prisoners who escape. There are no fences in Angola except around the individual prison housing camps, spread throughout the 18,000 acres. Wolf/German shepherds prowl between the double barbed-wire fences that surround the camps at night when men are locked into the cells or dormitories. Dense wooded hills teeming with snakes and the alligator-infested Mississippi River form a natural barrier to the prison.

If you did escape, where could you go? It is 20 miles to the nearest town, the road lined with ramshackle homes and the occasional decaying antebellum plantation. During the few occasions when the Mississippi has swelled and the levees that surround the prison burst, prison officials evacuate prisoners to higher ground. Angola is like a shallow bowl and the whole basin could flood.

How do you spend a life without the possibility of parole? For up to 15 hours a day, John passes time in the company of the chickens, peacocks, and guinea hens, mowing the lawn and tending the flowers. The animals belong to Warden Burl Cain, but this is John's tiny domain. "You can have a life here," a man who spent 28 years in Angola told me. But what is a life in Angola? The lifers and trustees are considered the "most rehabilitated" of prisoners. They have responsibilities, jobs, and a modicum of freedom to move around—to make their own days.

Burl Cain, the controversial warden of almost 20 years, who is tyrant, benevolent father, genius, charmer, and king to the men inside, says the prison is here to keep the prisoners safe, not punish them further. "They want to have their lives make sense," he explains. "There is something for everybody." And it is true that in most other prisons it is hard to imagine all these men bustling from place to place. Warden Cain says: "You can move your way up all the way in the system until you almost feel like you're free."

So many men are serving life because Louisiana boasts the harshest sentencing laws in the nation. First- and second-degree murderers automatically get life without parole, but the majority of prisoners are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, and the state mandatory minimums mean that a person can receive 20 years to life without parole for drug possession or shoplifting. Unlike most other places, which require a unanimous jury to secure a conviction, a person in Louisiana can be convicted on the votes of 10 out of 12 jurors.



According to the Prison Policy Initiative, Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the country with 868 of every 100,000 citizens in prison. African Americans make up 32 percent of Louisiana's population but constitute 66 percent of incarcerated people in the state. White people in Louisiana make up 60 percent of the general population but represent 30 percent of the incarcerated population. Even the conservative Texas Public Policy Network and the Reason Foundation recently issued a joint report recommending that Louisiana drastically alter its sentencing guidelines to reduce its prison population. They argued it is out of step with even conservative states like Georgia and Texas.

Louisiana's numerous parish jails also house state prisoners, and it is a lucrative enterprise for rural sheriff's departments who vie for prisoners from New Orleans and Baton Rouge to fill their jails and coffers. They are a powerful and vociferous lobby against any alteration to the sentencing status quo. Just as the brutal convict lease system, what historian Robert Perkinson calls the "most corrupt and murderous penal regime in American history," replaced slavery and shored up the walls of white supremacy after the Civil War, today's prison system is big business for law enforcement and corporations. Our criminal justice system is an economic machine fueled by sending men like John to prison for life.

Despair is a prisoner's most potent enemy. Both the prison administration and the men inside seem to agree on this alone. For the staff, it means everyone works to stave off violence and chaos. The trust system is meant to dole out incentives in the face of hopelessness. Angola had the dubious distinction of being known as the "bloodiest prison in America" until recently. Men slept with catalogues and phone books taped to their chests as shields against stabbing. Sexual exploitation was rampant, as Wilber Rideau—former editor of the *Angolite Magazine*, who spent 44 years in the prison—chronicled in his memoir *In the Place of Justice* and his co-authored book *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars*.

"You have to allow people to be creative or they will be creative in dark ways," says Cathy Fontenot, the assistant warden who retains a simultaneous vivacity and world-weariness after 18 years here. It's the first job she had out of college. To Fontenot, even being a field hand has value. Every day, all year round, hundreds of men are marched in a line, hoes balanced on their shoulders, to the immense Angola fields to pick beans, okra, squash, cotton, sugar cane, wheat, or corn. None of the 1,200 guards at Angola carry guns. The only exceptions are the field overseers, mounted on horses, with rifles beside them at all times.

Robert Mencie, a 31-year-old black man from California, expressed his incredulity upon being sent to the fields. "I didn't know people were still doing slave-type work. I didn't think they were doing that in America. Period. Until I come down here." And with black men making up 76 percent of the prisoners at Angola, the tableau of weary laborers could be a photo from the 1880s or 1920s. Robert might appreciate W.E.B. DuBois's classic quote about the failure of Reconstruction: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."

Cathy is adamant: "Here it isn't hopeless. They are safe, clean, and someone is paying attention." If she died at home, she frets about who would find her. She is between what she calls "wusband," and her kids live with their father during the week. At least at Angola, where privacy is nonexistent, a dead body is noticed immediately.

Later, two emaciated hunger strikers stagger into the infirmary and Cathy mentions the year's suicides. We visit hospice, a program initiated years ago by men in the prison. The workers there, most of them lifers, are devoted to caring for their brothers who are sick and dying, knowing they will one day take their place. They practice a selflessness rare in the free or unfree world. In the morning, they arrive to the stench of men no longer able to control their bodily functions. They bathe their withered bodies

They spoon-feed them. Their patients will never leave hospice, and their kindnesses and intimacies are perhaps the last these men will receive.

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I wonder about despair when you are locked down 23 out of 24 hours a day in a cell with even meager possessions denied to you. No books. Nothing but the company of yourself, one metal bed, and a toilet. This is Camp J or “the Dungeon,” where Angola exiles the “worst of the worst,” men with repeated disciplinary problems. When I visit, the men are outside for their allotted 45 minutes of daily exercise, confined in 8x10 cages, dog pens built for human beings.

We pass in front of the men in cages and down the row of cells, the officer bellowing “women on the floor” as a warning. How is our well-being, those of us the prisoners call “free people,” made possible by this dismal suffering? What is a livable life here? In his book *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment*, Robert Ferguson writes that punishment diminishes the punisher and the recipient. There is no redemptive future for the humans in cages in Camp J. But what might happen if more people looked

There are other lives in Angola, too. Close to 400 free people are born and raised inside the boundaries of the prison. A few miles from the main prison is B-Line, a town built for prison staff. There is a chapel, a pool, a recreation center, and the Prison View golf course. Although the prison began hiring African American correctional staff in 1975, B-Line is still a stronghold for white families who have worked here for generations. Their livelihoods depend on the men who spend their lives in Angola. John Floyd talks about small kids he observed growing up who are now prison lieutenants. Over half the B-Line population is children under 18. To them, Angola represents home and security.

John is determined not to die here, and certainly not to spend eternity in Angola’s grounds. After a brief tour and discussion about native Louisiana plants, he reenters his shack to retrieve a battered manila folder. Inside are photos of him with Emily Maw, director of the Innocence Project New Orleans, and her family. The Innocence Project has championed his case, which is marred by evidence suppression and police misconduct.

Thirty years earlier in the French Quarter of New Orleans, two gay men were discovered stabbed in the neck and chests within days of each other and a mile apart. Both had consensual sex with the assailant, who left a half-filled whiskey glass at each scene. The police discovered pubic hair belonging to an African American man at both crime scenes. John is white. No physical evidence, including blood type, ever linked John to either murder. Yet detectives relentlessly questioned him, plying him with numerous drinks at a gay bar he frequented.

John, who has an IQ of 59, lower than 99 percent of the population, and is highly susceptible to suggestion, confessed to both crimes. The judge acquitted him of one murder because the overwhelming physical evidence could not tie him to the crime scene, but convicted him of the other at the same trial. Since then, the Innocence Project has learned that the New Orleans district attorney’s office failed to turn over significant evidence. Fingerprints on the glasses at both locations belong to the same person (not the victim) and are not John’s. And so, after more than three decades, John continues to fight his case.

For John and the lifers, many of them old men, life outside Angola is a receding memory. What would it mean for John Floyd to walk out of Angola? The conundrum for so many of the lifers who have been in Angola for 30 years is that though they might be the most well-adjusted—“rehabilitated,” in the prison’s terms—they have adapted to the institution. Most of their families and friends abandoned them long ago. John, like many others, has never made peace with a life at Angola. You can build a life in Angola, and then there is life. Angola is always a qualification of a life. It is a constrained and diminished life. John’s life can never be self-determined, and isn’t that the definition of freedom?

# Prison “trustees” raise bloodhounds and breed wolf/German shepherd hybrids—the wolves alone were not deemed vicious enough. They train the bloodhounds to hunt prisoners who escape.

John Floyd’s story is his story, but it is also the story of thousands who will spend their lives in Angola and other prisons without the possibility of freedom. There are innocent and guilty men there. How long do we punish them? When is punishment enough? John’s misery is daily, endless, and ordinary. His time is a form of suffering. His hope, like that of all the lifers I met, rests on the prospect of freedom. The question remains: Who is served by his life in Angola?

At dusk, I talk to Warden Cain outside his massive, immaculately clean, and shiny Silverado SUV. Soon, all I will hear are the night sounds of Angola: the beseeching screams of peacocks and distant yelps of dogs as the clusters of lights of prison camps blink in the darkness. John approaches us. “I know you’re going to get out because you’re innocent,” Warden Cain says to him, almost nonchalantly. He turns to me and says: “He really is.” John, stone-faced, doesn’t respond. Instead he solemnly tells Warden Cain about the peacock eggs. They had been covered by a tarp, but it blew away in the wind. Now the eggs are broken and the chicks dead. The warden is distraught. “That’s bad luck,” he says. ●



*Adorno à la plage*

# The Logic of the Martyr

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STUART SMITHERS

...interior life (where the revolution always begins).

—Pasolini, *the last interview*

The sea is boiling, opening its belly. Revelation needs heat; brains that evaporate steaming thoughts. Then the mirage becomes reality. In agony, the light. In poverty, the future's birth. Then again the curse against the war machines uttered by the sun. But the sun is ever exploding death into life.

—Etel Adnan, *Seasons*

## Magic spell

We live today as if under a spell. The personality and ego formation that was somehow and at some time necessary as a mask became hardened and seemingly real, even to the point of becoming a form of life and having defense mechanisms. The ego represents nature's first attempt at and most sustained form of artificial intelligence. Adorno says that the process of dominance "keeps spewing undigested scraps of subjugated nature" while the spell produces a neatly dovetailed reality: "The reality principle, which the prudent heed in order to survive in it, *captures them as black magic*; they are unable and unwilling to cast off the burden, for magic hides it from them and makes them think it is life."<sup>1</sup>

To break the magic spell of capital we need luck and cunning, fortitude and courage, but above all, it seems to me, we could do with a little magic of our own. We are always everywhere faced with the question of means: *how* to awaken from the spell of late capitalism. I am beginning to think of the Frankfurt School as a guild of magicians—Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Marcuse—each with his own secrets and tool kit. Of course, the point of Frankfurt magic is simply to undo capitalism's magic: to engage critical means to awaken the dead, to make the scales fall from our eyes, as Horkheimer and Adorno say somewhere, to create the conditions for capital disenchantment. Susan Buck-Morss helped me with this thought, recognizing so much of Benjamin's particular genius when she wrote: "His legacy to readers who come after him is a non-authoritarian system of inheritance," a system of investigation and exposition like the "utopian tradition of fairy tales which instruct without dominating," an approach that results in victories over forces of domination."<sup>2</sup>

Is this a hopeless task—to awaken humanity from the dream world and to liberate us from our mechanical, zombie-like existence? For both Adorno and Benjamin humanity has forgotten life and being behind the mask, just as individuals have forgotten themselves and their life possibilities. Adorno's magic elaborates thinking, a thinking that shines a floodlight on deception, lies, false promises, and mechanisms of fear. His magic exposes the architecture and engineering of the spell: finding the weak spots in capital's system of magic, recognizing and exploiting the spaces in between, the gaps and intervals in capitalism's logic.

Benjamin, on the other hand, enters the world of imagination, inhabiting the dream world of capital and the space of things, awakening the reader to the illusory surface of commodities and to

transparency of things. His work often frees us from the hardness of reification and allows us to live the dream world conscious of its dreaminess. He is a master of dream-yoga, a form of lucid dreaming capital. Or perhaps we could think of his method as that of a hacker: finding the back door of the system, only to enter and exploit the system from within. Of course, the exploration of dream-yoga would be fetishistic if it weren't meant to demonstrate the nature of the dream world and the very real suffering that exists within in it.

## Virtues of Resistance

In Thesis IV of Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* (which he described in a letter to Gretel Adorno more "a bouquet of whispering grasses, gathered on reflective walks, than as a collection of theses"), we find an account of the virtues that arise from struggle for material existence:

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils that fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. *They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude.* They have a retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations. [Emphasis added.]

In *The Coming Insurrection*, the anonymous authors of the Invisible Committee make the observation "It's the privileged feature of radical circumstances that a rigorous application of logic leads to revolution. It's enough just to say what is before our eyes and not to shrink from the conclusions." But do we live in "radical circumstances"? Is the ongoing crisis radical, or should we agree that debilitating circumstances have become the norm and something radical is still missing? The Invisible Committee's statement might appear cold and cerebral, true but missing some element of passion that actually moves one from conclusions to action.

So if we wonder why there are so few revolutionaries today, we might ask: Is our logic off? Are we not rigorous enough? Are we avoiding conclusions? Are we lacking in virtue? Are we cowards?

Or: *What prepares the ground for the appearance of a revolutionary subject in a world where the fight for material existence seems to lack desperation?*

Certainly the struggle to feed oneself arises from a particular type of suffering, but in late capitalism we live in a system that both creates needs and largely fulfills those created needs. Do the "refined and spiritual things" in Benjamin's thesis—including the virtue of courage—arise only out of a desperate fight for material things? Living under the spell of late capitalism, turning a blind eye to suffering wherever possible, I would like to ask if there is some vital lesson to be learned from those who actually live in the most radical circumstances. If the tradition of the oppressed teaches us, what new lessons can we learn about the conditions for the appearance of a revolutionary subject who lives under the spell?

## Radical Circumstances

Grave digging, and washing and burying the bodies of the dead, is work for men in Islam. The women in Benghazi visit the graves of the new “martyrs” at night. For three days, Benghazi suffered the most brutal crackdown of any of the Arab uprisings with loyal troops even firing on crowds of mourners as they left the cemetery. Men carried the bodies of young men to their graves, bodies that had been ripped in half by assault rifles, as the funeral processions defiantly marched past Qaddafi’s military garrison, the Katiba, with some 5,000 soldiers and officers inside, including his Special Forces.

Mahdi Ziu was an unlikely hero: a quiet, 49-year-old married man with two daughters, working as a middle manager at the state oil company. His family and friends say he had little interest in politics. But the brutal repression proved too much; he had buried too many boys and young men. Then something happened; he reached a tipping point in himself—*beyond a certain point*, as Marx wrote. This interior zone of rising up, the appearance of exceptional “fearless” courage and the determination to act, is the space where Benjamin’s “refined and spiritual things” manifest in the struggle: These spiritual qualities appear during and through the act of resistance and rebellion, not afterward. The condition I imagine is one of both gradual and sudden transformation, the recognition of a transcendent solidarity—de-identity and relationship with the other, the young men of Benghazi both dead and living, with their families and friends of the dead and the living.

The residents of Benghazi resisted Qaddafi’s desperate attempts to crush the revolt and saw their friends and brothers cut in half by anti-aircraft guns as they mounted their assault on the garrison with Molotov cocktails, stones, bulldozers, and fish bombs. Mahdi Ziu was “inconspicuously transformed”; his wife, his daughters, his friends knew nothing. He asked his neighbors to help him load four canisters of propane into his car and when they asked what he was doing, he told them the propane canisters had leaks and he was taking them to get fixed.

Mahdi Ziu drove his car in the next day’s funeral procession and protest. When he was close enough to the gates of the Katiba, he swerved out of the crowd and floored his accelerator. Guards fired on him but it was too late: The explosion blew a huge hole in the wall. The pile of concrete and twisted rebar is now called the “martyr’s gate” in Mahdi’s honor. Within hours, Qaddafi’s forces had been defeated, many disappearing into the countryside, the feared Katiba abandoned. The tide had turned for the Libyan uprising.

The collective tipping point for the rebels had probably come earlier, but now the reality of their courage was clear. On the walls of the city, Arabic graffiti appeared: “We have broken the fear barrier. We won’t retreat.”

## **Against Self-Preservation at All Costs**

Two types of courage issue from a certain duality. One knows that one is afraid but determines not to be overcome by the fear that is all too evident to oneself. In this type of courage, one struggles not to be overwhelmed by fear. The other courage appears as a spontaneous event, whole, absolute, and complete—not as a struggle. This second kind of courage is no doubt preceded by struggle, but there is a sudden and definite shift. To call it courage may even be wrong, because what appears to be courageous action issues from a state of fearlessness. This is not an overcoming of fear in the sense that one is able to act despite fear, but an absence of fear. This second type of courage is naturally preceded by fear and other conditions, but appears unpredictably when an unknown tipping point is reached. As Marx says, the tipping point marks a distinct change in quality: “Merely quantitative differences, beyond a certain point, pass into qualitative changes.” Both types of courage reflect different levels of freedom from the captu-

of self-preservation's urge.<sup>3</sup>

The courage during the Benghazi funeral processions was certainly honorable and remarkable, but the media reports about the protesters did not reflect language that was particularly religious, only the more casual and formulaic statements about "God being with them" that day because their heads weren't blown off.

In the dream-world of late capitalism, the question of self-preservation must include questions of identity and ontology: *What* self is being preserved and *why*? And to what extent does a subconscious urge for self-preservation work against the spontaneous arising of a revolutionary subject?

Like the ego itself, the urge for self-preservation served some logical function in the distant evolutionary past when self-preservation of the species was precarious and difficult. Adorno identifies the ego drive as the instrument of self-preservation, and suggests that the power of the ego drive remains "irresistible even after technology has virtually made self-preservation easy..."<sup>4</sup>

## The Logic Is Not Logical Anymore

If I am reading this correctly, Adorno comes very close to Fanon's anti-identitarian objection when he declares his refusal to be a tool or be subject to the power of a tool. This is to recognize the enemy within as the reified hardened ego, always seeking dominance and maintaining itself as the false master. Adorno notes that the human species inherited something compulsive from animals with regard to self-preservation, but in the human it is qualitatively transformed because the reflective faculty of mind that might break the spell has instead entered into the service of the spell, become the instrument of the spell as reified consciousness:

By such self-preservation it reinforces the spell and makes it radical evil, devoid of the innocence of mere being the way one is. In human experience the spell is the equivalent of the fetish character of merchandise. The self-made thing becomes a thing-in-itself, from which the self cannot escape anymore... In the spell, the reified consciousness has become total.<sup>6</sup>

The genealogy of the spell indicates that the reflected nature of the mind entered the service of capital as spell as reified consciousness—which, adding the ego's force, qualitatively changes the drive of self-preservation and creates a perpetual reinforcement for both reified ego-consciousness and the spell. In this form, risk-avoidance, conformity, and the secret mechanisms of fear become normative strategies of a spellbound consciousness that seeks to preserve itself.

## The Martyr Is Indeed Extreme

The martyr represents what we have denied ourselves. The martyr is a representation of pleasure—of all the pleasures we have foregone in fear of death, to stay alive, to preserve ourselves—and all pain. For most religious mentalities, heaven represents not so much the restitution of all-pleasure, but the survival of a status quo of compromised pleasure and the escape from the danger of hell, displeasure, and the fear of displeasure. Heaven is approached through fear (and desire). The martyr is a model of uncompromised fearlessness and pleasure.

Western politicians and pundits would like to brainwash us into believing that all "martyrs" are brainwashed. Stories about 72 virgins awaiting martyrs in paradise reflect the same pleasure-oriented

dualism—desire for the happiness of heaven, fear of hell—that operates on some level in all religions. But the image of the “brainwashed” martyr is also an easy target for the media, where the rhetoric of modern martyrdom is presented in wholly irrational terms in order to rationalize our own fear and powerlessness in the face of extreme sacrifice. Someone like Mahdi Ziu—a comfortable, middle-class engineer with family and career—is an unimaginable martyr. The idea and image of the martyr needs to be rehabilitated. Only when we finally begin to try to understand the unimaginable martyr will we begin to understand the fear and confusion behind the cartoon version of the logic of the martyr.

Why do politicians and the media insist that martyrs are “cowards” and extremists? It was striking in the immediate aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris that the international media could only repeat worn-out ideological themes of cowardice and victory: *They will win* (if we don’t). Anyone who watched the closed-circuit surveillance footage of the street encounter between the Paris police attempting to block the escape and the shooters couldn’t possibly think these men were cowards. One could assign endless adjectives and wonder about their actions and motives, but “cowardly” would not apply. And doesn’t the rhetoric of heroism, of a society determined to put its head down and march ahead—not determined to preserve life but preserve a *lifestyle*—really mean that we would prefer not to think? Some 80,000 French security forces were summoned to find the two “extremists.” “Winning” only means to preserve an already suspicious life, but the meta-level of the contest suggests that extremists can’t possibly lose.

The martyr is indeed extreme, but not all extremists are martyrs. The extreme dualism inherent in the difference between the Messianic and the profane (sketched out in Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment” written in 1921), runs counter to the preservation of a comfortable, compromised self. The dialectics of an extreme self has roots in Western metaphysics:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”  
(*Revelation* 3:15–16)

Bataille suggests that there is no society without an accursed share—that part of society that will destroy us, unless we destroy it—and the means to continue the life of the society is *sacrifice*. The contemporary contestation between the West and “extreme” forms of resistance could be viewed as a contest of *sacrifice*—a potlatch of sacrificial modes that the West is losing. Any rhetoric of sacrifice in the West betrayed by an almost universal refusal to consider altering our *lifestyle*, while not hesitating to “sacrifice” the other in a vain attempt at self-preservation. The accursed share that is already turning on society is vast material accumulation and the attachment to comfort, pleasure, and self.<sup>7</sup> The two vastly different dimensions of sacrifice revealed by the martyr—refusing to sacrifice capital-driven lifestyle, versus the actually existing sacrifice of self—reflect two models of non-rational gestures, only one of which is grounded in a metaphysic of redemption. The martyr is traditionally the one who witnesses the world and suffers for that vision and testimony. Socrates and Christ are the archetype of the Western martyr-witnesses who refused to renounce what they saw and described as the real world, and at the same time represented an unbearable presence and reminder for those who had no interest in, or feared, rocking the status quo.

The world system has even created a new type of secular martyr, the capitalist martyr. After the twelfth worker jumped to suicide at the Foxconn site in China that manufactures many of Apple’s products, a worker-blog provided this posting:



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