



If I am Troy Davis, I Failed Troy Davis: Abolishing the Death Penalty through an Antiracist People's Geography

Nik Heynen¹

University of Georgia
nheynen@uga.edu

Abstract

In the wake of Georgia's execution of Troy Davis, the importance of antiracist geographic thought has become ever more pertinent for clarifying how democratic politics and a people's geography can help to bring about the abolition of the death penalty in the U.S. This paper seeks to engage the painful historical-geographical legacies of white supremacy and the ways it has enabled capital punishment with an eye to moving toward a less violent and less dehumanizing state. More specifically, I imagine my historical-geographical engagement to provide a foundation from which to discuss putting into motion more deliberately what W.E.B. DuBois referred to as "Abolition Democracy". In realizing the potential of DuBois' notion of abolition democracy though, I will suggest more geographical attention to the ways racialized geographies have not been as explicitly connected to the notion of a people's geography.

Introduction

In the opening pages of his book entitled *Peculiar Institution: America's Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition*, David Garland quotes a Philadelphia journalist from 1812 to say (2010: 9) "So much has been written and said on the subject of capital punishment that it seems almost like presumptive vanity to



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pursue the topic any further.” However, despite the 200 plus years since this quote was first published, it is important to reflect on how few geographers have discussed the subject of capital punishment. Furthermore, while there has been considerable dialogue about the death penalty over the last two centuries, there has not as of yet been sufficient exposure to the racialized nature of capital punishment within the U.S. I would argue that unless the majority of Americans are ready to admit the U.S. is indeed a white supremacist nation, which I do not think is the case, the racial biases within the application of the death penalty across the U.S. require that it be abolished. As such, many questions persist, especially questions that can help glean insights into the spatial logics that surround the abolition of capital punishment within the U.S.

These questions help to better embody what Harvey (1984: 9) long ago called for regarding the development of a people’s geography, but especially help embody it in racially attuned ways regarding how to: “build a popular geography, free from prejudice but reflective of real conflicts and contradictions, capable also of opening new channels for communication and common understanding.” Given this task necessitates working through painfully violent and dehumanizing histories within and across the U.S., it is a fraught task, but one that requires continued vigilance given that need to continuing to build an antiracist people’s geography and the emancipatory change such a geography could engender.

The jumping off point for this essay is the execution of Troy Davis. Davis was executed on 21 September 2011 for having been convicted for the 19 August 1989, murder of police officer Mark MacPhail in Savannah, Georgia. The case against Troy Davis was based exclusively of witness testimony. However, the body of evidence had myriad inconsistencies, discrepancies, and biased logics. Between Davis’ trial and his execution, every one of the state’s non-police witnesses, except two, withdrew or contradicted their personal testimony. This “reasonable doubt” did in no way deter the State of Georgia from putting Davis to death (see Montoya, 2011, Severson 2011).

Many of the witnesses who recanted their testimony stated in sworn affidavits that they were pressured, coerced or cajoled by police officials into testifying and/or signing statements that wrongfully incriminated Davis (Kagel and Marlowe, 2010). After the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles set a hearing for Davis’ second bid for clemency for 19 September, and then proceeded to deny it, the ground fell from under many within Georgia and the world over. Davis was declared dead at 11:08 pm on September 21st, 2011.

The political campaign to have Davis exonerated adopted the phrase “I am Troy Davis” in an effort to galvanize widespread associative empathy; a staple of popular organizing. The notion that Davis was innocent, simply living his life, but as an African-American man, looms large for situating how and why he was ultimately executed, and under what domain of authority. Ultimately, we are left with the stark recognition that there was not a powerful enough campaign of consciousness raising to counteract the embedded white-supremacist logic and

history that continues to impact political life in states like Georgia, despite the fact that these states are clearly populated by moral, just and ethically motivated people. The weight of history often requires much more than simply moral, just and ethically motivated people to be redirected toward egalitarian ends, especially if those people are passive.

If in fact “I am Troy Davis”, “I”, collectively, also simultaneously failed Troy Davis, as did the larger movement for not raising enough sufficient awareness and action to change political will and in turn the tide of history against the uneven power structures that ultimately lead to his, and many others’, demise. To be clear, this is not an argument of blaming those who did struggle for Troy David writ large, especially not his family and the circle of people who worked tirelessly to win his freedom from death; they should be lauded for their sacrifice and vigilance. Instead, I am arguing that there is a need to work to connect the white-supremacist history of the death penalty in Georgia, and the U.S. more broadly, to non-violent civil disobedient direct action politics in an effort to compel an abolitionist movement and the tactical struggle toward an antiracist and more egalitarian society.

Going deeper into the history of capital punishment is necessary to situate the execution of Troy Davis. Unfortunately, this history makes Troy Davis’ execution seem inevitable as opposed to a remarkable miscarriage of justice. Indeed, subaltern relations to the racial state have always led to violent neglect and fierce silence. Reflecting on these histories, however, offer the most profound argument for reviving the ideas of “abolition democracy” as first articulated by W.E.B. Dubois in the service of an antiracist people’s geography and thinking through the necessary direct action tactics to see it manifest, not only in Georgia, but the U.S. over.

Unraveling the White-Supremacist Noose

To imagine the contemporary dynamics of capital punishment as anything other than the historically embedded and logical extension of the U.S.’s intertwined geographies of racist-capitalist-patriarchal politics seems implausible when deep history is taken seriously (see Tabak 1990-1991, Ogletree 2002, Phillips 2008). Take for instance, according to Baldus et al. (1998) that in 96% of the states where there have been reviews of race and the death penalty, there was a pattern of either race-of victim or race-of-defendant discrimination, or both. According to Pokorak (1998) 98% of the chief district attorneys in death penalty states are white; only 1% is African-American. A comprehensive study of the death penalty in North Carolina revealed that the percent chances of receiving a death sentence increased by 3.5 times among defendants whose crimes were perpetuated on white victims. Another self-contained study in California found that those who murdered whites were over three times more likely to be sentenced to capital punishment than those who murdered blacks and over four times more likely than those who murdered Latinos. (Pierce and Radelet 2005).

To understand the deep history that has led to these numbers however we must situate them within Wilson Gilmore's (2002: 16) dialectical notion of "fatal couplings" to realize how "racism is a practice of abstraction, a deathdealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories." In line with Wilson Gilmore's articulation of hierarchical difference, it is also vital to note that the ebb and flow of which axis of identity matters most between race, class and gender is always in question and dependent upon the historical-geographical context, and in the end that all matter a great deal within the history of the U.S. Once abstracted, the weaving of racist, capitalist and gender relations all work to tighten the coercive power of uneven social power relations toward path dependent oppression. To this end, Wilson Gilmore goes on to say (2002: 16) "Racism functions as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating in an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world onto those who, due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of those costs."

Today's embedded capital punishment practices come out of the darkest national threads of white-supremacist, capitalist and gendered histories, and Georgia stands out as among the most malicious. Going back through some of the earliest historical records of capital punishment in the state helps illuminate the historical-geographical unfolding of these wicked tenants of Georgian, as well as, U.S. cultural history. Gray (2008) shows that in 1775 capital crimes in Georgia consisted of "any slave who killed a white person, grievously wounded, maimed or bruised a white person, was convicted for a third time of striking a white person, raised or attempted an insurrection, or endeavored to entice a slave to run away and leave the colony." In 1816, Gray suggests that Georgia made a set of acts capital crimes, but only if they were perpetuated by a slave or a 'free person of color'. This list included poisoning or attempted poisoning of another individual; insurrection, whether successful or not; rape or attempted rape of a white woman; physically attacking a white person with a weapon or attacking them with the intent to murder them; injuring, or maiming a white person; and finally, theft or burglary.

Additionally, we cannot think about the death penalty in the U.S. without paying close attention to way it evolved out of the culture of lynching across the U.S. (especially South), as well as how in addition the racial and capitalist underpinnings of contemporary geographies of capital punishment, gender has helped to enmesh logics of lynching into contemporary practices (see Brundage 1993). In a way that shows the dynamics of the fatal couplings at play here, Angela Davis (1983: 183) points out that during slavery lynching of African-American people was not as extensive as some might think and the reason for this is that slave-owners did not want to destroy the source of their surplus value generation and their value property; in both cases, the slave. Davis goes on to discuss how it was actually more common that lynching was aimed at white abolitionists, "who had no cash value on the market" (183) and worked to

undermine the cash value of slavery. Despite this, when lynching did occur of African-American people, the trials were often no more than theatrical formality, to appease a false moral sensibility.

Davis (1983) has also discussed the fatal couplings of race/class/gender regarding the history of lynching, which can still be seen in the current culture of capital punishment. Drawing on Frederick Douglass, Davis's (1983: 175) discussion of the "The Myth of the Black Rapist" shows both how slavery was as dependent on sexual abuse as it was other forms of violence ("whip and the lash") and that simultaneously as an operationalization of racialized hegemony black men were demonized as predators of white women. This demonization was often based on false information, but was nonetheless a historical impetus behind the lynching of African-American men in South despite the economic losses that would occur to slave owners and later land owners. It is hard to not see these mythologies ever-present within Michele Alexander's (2010: 180) discussion of the continued gender and family dynamics resulting from the fact that more African-American men are in prison, on probation or on parole today than were enslaved in 1850, ten years prior to the beginning of the U.S. Civil War.

Historical analyses show that mob lynchings began to decline in the South through the first three decades of the twentieth century, which seems to have only happened as capital executions by the state increased. The sum result however was minimally different from the larger perspective of terror the state exercised over its racialized public (see Jackson 1996). During these early changes, we see an evolution from lynching era hangings to more to state sanctioned electrocution and ultimately lethal injection (see Banner 2002; Garland 2010). While subtler and more difficult to pin down, the same white supremacist logic that fueled the lynchings of the nineteenth century provided the spatial logic for the staying power of capital punishment in the U.S. South. We can see how this less visible ethos was disguised through the "Southern strategy". The Southern Strategy was first pioneered by Barry Goldwater when he ran for U.S. president in 1964 and was brilliantly executed by Richard Nixon in his 1968 and 1973 presidential efforts. The Southern strategy offers insights of a sort to this sort of a political regime if we extract the radicalized logic from more contemporary politics.

In essence, the "Southern strategy" was a deliberate effort to harness and exploit the discontent among Southern white voters for Republican political gain and leverage that disgruntlement throughout a series of wedge issues (see Aistrup 1996; Garland 2010). Flaming existing tensions around the dissatisfaction connected to important Civil Rights Movement victories, Republicans were able to bolster latent hostilities and create more distance between white ideological perspectives and the manner in which African-American's anti-oppression efforts were painted as detrimental to the white quality of life and future prosperity. The spectacle of violence in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr's assassination in cities like Chicago, Washington D.C., Baltimore and others created vivid imagery that could be exploited for conservative political gain. Goldwater and others masked

their white-supremacist discourse in the context of “law and order” in the wake of different moments of civil disobedient direct action that while necessary for the sake of winning civil rights has history has shown, nonetheless allowed African-American protesters to be vilified and law breakers, criminals and thugs. Once racialized discourses of “law and order” had been created and spun it continued to gain traction and be amplified through successive waves of conservative politics ranging between Goldwater up to G.W. Bush. The ability to keep capital(ist) punishment as a necessity was accomplished by deliberately pitting white majority populations against African-American communities by discursively keeping “ghetto riots”, “street crime” “violent marches”, “lazy welfare dependent people” and economic instability actively spinning throughout media cycles. These same sorts of discursive politics are not surprisingly similar to what DuBois discussed in *Black Reconstruction in America* as the dominant white narrative about African-Americans during reconstruction in a chapter called “The Propaganda of History” when he said (1995: 711-712) that all American children were taught that “All Negroes were ignorant”, “All Negroes were lazy, dishonest, and extravagant”, and “Negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction. (711–12). In sum, because Southern white men were seen as the big losers in the wake of the demise of Jim Crow this racist strategy continues to prevail.

Again, Georgia state history specifically looms large in the story of capital punishment in the U.S. beyond the attention the Troy Davis case received. Prior to 1976, the state of Georgia officially put 950 people to death. In 1972, the case *Furman v. Georgia*, which got increased attention in 2012 with its 40th year anniversary, went to the Supreme Court and forced a comprehensive analysis of the constitutionality of the death sentence for both rape and murder convictions. The Supreme Court ruled to invalidate all of the death penalty laws across the U.S. as the ruling determined it was “cruel and unusual”. This suspension of capital punishment however, did not last long as individual U.S. States then began rewriting their statutes to comply with the Court's ruling. It was again in Georgia that the national death penalty was re-enacted in 1976, after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Gregg v. Georgia* decision, that Georgia's new capital punishment procedures were sufficient in reducing arbitrary imposition of the death penalty. Since this decision, Georgia, as of the writing of this essay, has executed 53 people since 1976. As of writing this there were 94 people on death row in Georgia. One of them is/was a woman. It is worth noting however that five innocent people have been freed from death row in Georgia. Georgia is one of only five states in which the State Board of Pardons, currently comprised of all men with a background in law enforcement has exclusive authority to grant clemency.

These white-supremacist traditions in criminal justice are undeniably maintained in Georgia’s courtrooms today. Georgia attorney Stephen Bright notes in the Santa Clara Law Review (1995; also see 1994) “At least five men who were sentenced to death in Georgia had [court-appointed] lawyers who referred to them

in court as ‘niggers.’” This also demonstrates another moment of fatal coupling within death penalty convictions, which is that they are generally reserved for the poor who cannot afford other than court appointed attorneys who are renowned for not pursuing justice for their clients or have no resources for adequate defense. This last point shows, “beyond a reasonable doubt” what Frederick Douglas meant when he said in 1883 that “Justice is often painted with bandaged eyes. She is described in forensic eloquence, as utterly blind to wealth or poverty, high or low, white or black, but a mask of iron, however thick, could never blind American justice, when a black man happens to be on trial.”

Continuing Toward Abolition Democracy

Silence hides abuse and geographers continuing to be silent about the geographies of justice writ large or the geographies of capital punishment more specifically raises important challenges to be thought through and acted upon (see Harries and Cheatwood 1997). I want to argue, however, that intellectuals and activists have the ability to reshape the notion of what “Amerikkka” is and rejecting the very fabric of white supremacist culture and the social institutions it has created requires deliberate action. Just as Frederick Douglas long ago articulated the racialized nature of injustice within the U.S. legal system as a framing for abolitionist politics, he too thought about what it would take to bring about antiracist social change about which he most famously articulated in his 1857 speech “If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress” in which he says:

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men [sic] who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters....Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will....If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.

As history and geography illustrate, progressive struggles for antiracist social change require thoughtful political vision, strategic political organizing and necessarily, forceful agitation to help spark consciousness and facilitate follow through direct action. I want to revisit, with an interest in investing new intellectual and political energies, W.E.B. DuBois (1995) discussion of “Abolition Democracy” as a driving force behind an antiracist and anti-death penalty politics. In *Black Reconstruction in America* (1995) DuBois discusses how African-American slaves fighting against the Confederacy, which was really about fighting for their freedom, increasingly recognized that freedom as they had imagined it might be impossible. This kind of freedom would be impossible because so many of the political, economic, and cultural institutions within the South were based in an ideology of African-American inferiority; thus being free in a society which had evolved within the same kind of white-supremacist ideology that could allow slavery to exist in the first place. Instead many of the slaves, as they worked

toward their freedom, came to recognize larger structural issues beyond their freedom that were also going to be necessary and DuBois very insightfully called these political needs ‘abolition democracy’ (DuBois, 1995). It is a version of democracy that is too often discussed in the founding documents of the U.S. but one that *actually* was available to all within the U.S., as opposed to exclusively landed white men,

According to Lipsitz, (2004) the means for realizing abolition democracy was the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Fourteenth Amendment was an effort to assure full rights to former slaves. This would be the most robust mechanism for ameliorating the subalternity that had loomed so large for so long. This legal provision was a necessary struggle in the aftermath the 1857 Dred Scott decision in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 7-2 that African-Americans, or rather persons of ancestry originating in Africa were “property not people” and were unable to claim citizenship. Without the rights of citizenship there would be no way for African-Americans to protect themselves from the oppression of racist state governments. According to Lipsitz (2004) abolition democracy, as a political vision embedded within the Fourteenth Amendment, confronted, and gave a means to struggle against, the white-supremacy that flowed from white Protestant propertied men who had created the prevailing democratic system. According to DuBois in *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1995:185):

When, however, the South went beyond reason and truculently demanded not simply its old political power but increased political power based on disfranchised Negroes, which it openly threatened to use for the revision of the tariff, for the repudiation of the national debt, for disestablishing the national banks, and for putting the new corporate form of industry under strict state regulation and rule, Northern industry was frightened and began to move towards the stand which abolition-democracy had already taken; namely, temporary dictatorship, endowed Negro education, legal civil rights, and eventually even votes for Negroes to offset the Southern threat of economic attack.

Indeed, as Lipsitz (2004: 273-274) suggests abolition democracy and the Fourteenth Amendment “opened the door for subsequent claims for social justice by immigrants and their children, religious minorities, women, workers and people with disabilities. From voting rights to affirmative action, from fair housing to fair hiring, the Fourteenth Amendment is an enduring and abiding force for social justice in US society.” While Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, under which freed slaves became U.S. citizens who were entitled to “the full and equal benefits of all laws”, history has shown this vision has not been realized. And, while the bill gave U.S. Federal Courts the authority to arbitrate, mediate and intervene when either state and/or local governments failed to provide the full rights under the law, monthly, weekly, daily injustices persist. This disjuncture and the everyday violence that exists within the racial state have important

ramifications for considering abolishing the death penalty once and for all within an abolition democracy framework.

While it is located elsewhere in DuBois' writing, the means to bolster and expand the capacity of abolition democracy are clear enough in his logic and they necessitate agitation and the sorts of direct action politics that are absent (at the necessary scale) from within contemporary death penalty politics. In a speech given on March 7th, 1907 titled "The Value of Agitation" DuBois (1970: 175&177) outlines the unalienable optimism inherent to agitation: "There are those people in the world who object to agitation and one cannot wholly blame them...It is not always to nice ears to hear a man ever coming with his dark facts and unpleasant conditions. Nevertheless it is the highest optimism to bring forward the dark side of any human picture."

In another essay, more specific to death penalty politics written in *The Crisis* in August 1927, Dubois (1983: 472) wrote of the silence of lynchings as a clarion call to action in a way that echoed loudly throughout the case of Troy Davis:

The recent horrible lynchings in the United States, even the almost incredible burning of human beings alive, have raised not a ripple of interest, not a single protest from the United States Government, scarcely a word from the pulpit and not a syllable of horror or suggestion from the Defenders of the Republic, the 100% Americans, or the propagandists of the army and navy....And yet hiding and concealing this barbarism by every resource of American silence, we are sitting in council at the Geneva and Peking and trying to make the word believe that we are a civilized nation.

There have been few individuals who have as forcefully both shown the embodiment of these contradictions in the public eye and formulated such powerful ideas about them as Angela Davis who situates herself within an abolitionist tradition against the prison industrial complex. Davis herself had been arrested and wrongly charged with first degree murder and aggravated kidnapping after a failed effort by Jonathan Jackson to free African-American prisoners from a Marin County [California] courthouse resulted in the death of Judge Harold Haley; a case that potentially had her facing a death sentence. In pondering the abolition of the death penalty years after she gained her freedom, Davis (2005: 96) says: "...What would it mean to abolish the death penalty? The problem is that most people assume that the only alternative to death is a life sentence without the possibility of parole. However, if we think about capital punishment as an inheritance of slavery, its abolition would also involve the creation of those institutions about which Dubois wrote-institutions that still remain to be built one hundred and forty years after the end of slavery." She (205: 96) goes on to say, echoing DuBois, "There is a direct connection with slavery: when slavery was abolished, African-American people were set free, but they lacked access to the material resources that would enable them to fashion new, free lives. Prisons have thrived over the last century

precisely because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery.”

Abolition democracy helps us envision an antiracist political ideal that could yield the abolition of capital punishment through the logic that grassroots direct action politics by citizens from all walks of life working toward transforming unjust state practices. This proposition however necessitates calling up spatial logics of consciousness raising at an immense scale given the inertia of the racialized history that continues to prevail in allowing the uneven application of capital punishment. This plan would necessitate a truly antiracist people’s geography.

Toward an Antiracist People’s Geography of the Death Penalty

Legal philosopher Adam Sitze (2009: 222) suggests “where the death penalty is concerned, the difference between classical and modern political philosophy is almost meaningless: both Plato and Kant agree on the necessity of the death penalty for a well governed republic.” This suggests status quo hierarchical governmental power has imposed death sentences throughout much of political history. However, Sitze goes on to suggest a more hopeful insight regarding the continued cultivation of an antiracist people’s geography, (2009: 223): “It is indeed not modern political philosophy but an unprecedented form of what we might call political nonphilosophy that gives this [abolitionist] tradition its epistemic foundations.” Sitze goes on to suggest “It was the nonphilosophers — mercantilists, cameralists, police theorists, enlightened despots, the inconstant multitude—who first posed the death penalty as a serious problem for thought and who, in so doing, found it incoherent, undesirable, unnecessary, and even repulsive.”

Albert Camus’ Reflection on the Guillotine (1960) offers other important insights about the cultivation of an antiracist people’s geography that could be central to abolition democracy from the perspective of cultivating an organizing logic toward abolishing capital punishment. His essay usefully captures the foundational terror inherent to capital punishment in the context of a lack of equivalency, thereby framing capital punishment as blithe on any domain of society that would enact it. To this he says (196:199):

An execution is not simply death. It is just as different from the privation of life as a concentration camp is from prison. It adds to death a rule, a public premeditation known to the future victim, an organization which is itself a source of moral sufferings more terrible than death. Capital punishment is the most premeditated of murders, to which no criminal’s deed, however calculated can be compared. For there to be an equivalency, the death penalty would have to punish a criminal who had warned his victim of the date at which he would inflict a horrible death on him and who, from that moment onward, had

confined him at his mercy for months. Such a monster is not encountered in private life.

Camus starts his essay of by telling about a brutal murder by an assassin who slaughtered a family of farmers, including their children and was condemned to death in Algiers. The sentiment of many locals, including Camus' father was that decapitation was too mild a punishment for such a monster. Camus' father was so angry, especially about the children that although he had never witnessed an execution before, he had to see this one. After the execution however, his father never discussed it. Camus' mother simply relayed that when he came rushing home after the execution his father' face was distorted and he refused to talk. He rushed to bed to lie down but then began to vomit uncontrollably. Camus surmises that through this experience his father discovered the reality hidden under the noble phrases with which the act of state sanctioned murder is masked. Instead of thinking about the justice the murdered children had received through the execution, Camus' father could think of nothing but the quivering body that had just been dropped onto a board to have its head cut off. About this incident, Camus writes in the essay: "When the extreme penalty simply causes vomiting on the part of the responsible citizen it is supposed to protect, how can anyone maintain that it is likely, as it ought to be, to bring peace and order into the community? Rather, it is obviously no less repulsive than the crime, and this new murder, far from making amends for the harm done to the social body, adds a new blot to the first one." This logic explains why the state takes such effort to hide away their destruction of other living human beings. However, this fact also provides an essential organizing logic for thinking about abolition of the death penalty, which is to work to symbolically, discursively and materially to expose more of the citizenry to the brutality done in their name as a way of raising consciousness and turning the political tide.

Just like David Garland, Camus engages the media's representation as problematic, through the ritualized language that fills the papers the days after an execution, which I'll note rings just as true today just as it did when Camus wrote this essay. We read that the condemned, "has paid his debt to society", or that "he has atoned", or that "5am justice was done". The officials call the condemned "the interested party" or refer to him as a number. Camus says "people write about capital punishment as if they are whispering...When the imagination sleeps words are emptied of their meaning: a deaf population absent mindedly registers the condemnation of a man."

As a way of extending and building a more empathetic antiracist people's geography I want to invoke Wilson Gilmore's (2007) notion of how dehumanization works as a way to better spatialize Camus' logic across the emotional terrain necessary for individuals organizing, fighting and challenging racist institutions that bring death. The strategic reason for connecting Wilson Gilmore's discussion of dehumanization and an antiracist people's geography is that together these ideas provide important fodder, through a different kind of

coupling, for how seeing racialized political economic process continue to kill and maim the human spirit at the same time as human bodies within the so called “post-racial state”. Wilson Gilmore suggests in her book *Golden Gulag* (2007: 243) “in the contemporary world, racism is the ordinary means through which dehumanization achieves ideological normality, while at the same time, the practice of dehumanizing people produces racial categories.” She says “[d]ehumanization names the deliberate, as well as the mob-frenzied, ideological displacements central to any group’s ability to annihilate another in the name of territory, wealth, ethnicity, religion.” These processes of dehumanization are the same cultural dynamics that have been central the lynching logic in Georgia’s early history and have to be explanatory today regarding the passivity regarding the death penalty. This recognition provides an opportunity then as a target bigger than the death penalty to organize an antiracist people’s geography around; “free from prejudice but reflective of real conflicts and contradictions, capable also of opening new channels for communication and common understanding” (Harvey 1984: 9).

Abolitionist Direct Action

While there are various schools of thought and practice across organizing traditions, the evolution of political action that I argue are best suited for mobilizing an antiracist people’s geography capable of enacting abolition democracy were forged in the abolition and civil rights movements. Joel Olson (2004: 136) suggests “There are three elements of abolitionist praxis that are particularly relevant for today: their model of the political actor as agitator, their emphasis on freedom, and their willingness to follow radical implications of their demands.” Olson goes on to suggest (2004: 134) “that abolition-democracy was revolutionary because in challenging the power of the former slave masters, it cut to the foundations of the nation’s class system.” Here we see the possibility of uncoupling in a way that would allow for more strategic and focused politics.

Olson (136) draws on Aileen Kraditor to look more historically and suggest at one level Garrisonian abolitionist politics can again be informative and I would add especially informative for an antiracist people’s geography. He suggests that the Garrisonians foremost concern was to build a constituency, not to influence legislators, pass laws, or run candidates for office. They mobilized and organized to build a movement by sparking consciousness, facilitating and engendering vocal debate and symbolic representation. He suggests they published propaganda to get people to think more deeply amidst the pace of their everyday lives and refused to sacrifice political principles for political expediency. Olson relays that the Garrisonian abolitionist as agitator rejected compromise for the sake adherence to principle had integrity and would, within this realm of the political increase the reach of abolitionist politics. We can then imagine this sort of abolitionist ethos at the intersection of abolition democracy, an antiracist people’s geography and the abolition of the death penalty as efforts across all three have played out more contemporarily.

In the years following the Supreme Court's decision to allow the resumption of the death penalty in 1976, Haines (1996) suggests there have been important instances of abolitionists using non-violent direct action politics as a way of bringing attention to capital punishment. For the most part, the range of these activities included marches, rallies, vigils, as well as other more creative tactics like hunger strikes and street theater in the way of "mock executions". However there has not been a lasting direct action politics directed toward the abolition of the death penalty for several reasons and they provide insights in to why more was not done to save Troy Davis' life and why must be done in general.

First, as Haines (1996: 132) discusses, the increasing conservatism of U.S. politics created a different terrain and imaginary during the years immediately following the 1976 *Gregg v. Georgia* decision bolstered by the Southern Strategy for many engaged in death penalty abolition. According to Haines, many activists within the movement felt the degree of sympathy during the previous civil rights movement or Vietnam War activism allowed the mobilization direct action politics in a way that did not seem feasible. This broader concern was reinforced by the fact that in the 1980s the pace of capital cases sped up to such degree that activists were overwhelmed with day-to-day tasks like helping provide and pay for legal defense campaigns for capital cases recognizing that good lawyering often adds time for death row inmates. The dwindling numbers of activists organizing during the 1980s and 1990s in relation to the increase in executions smothered the ability to orchestrate more symbolic forms of protest and indeed quotidian survival politics were necessary.

Despite this there are still important episodes we can draw upon that allow us to connect abolitionist politics in the abstract with concrete organizing tactics and the case of Troy Davis. For instance, a group of activists who organize under the moniker of the Abolitionist Action Committee participate in semi-regular protests by which they attempt to engage in direct action to agitate, arouse public consciousness and participate in decidedly visible public education about the alternatives to the death penalty. In January of 2012, fourteen members of the group were arrested at the U.S. Supreme Court for unfurling a 30-foot banner that read "STOP EXECUTIONS!" on the stairs leading up the Court. The group timed their action to occur just after 10:00 am which was the time that Gary Gilmore was put to death executed in 1977. Gilmore was the first person executed in the U. S. after the 1976 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Gregg v. Georgia*. Since coming together as a group in 1997, forty-eight arrests have been made of associated members the Abolitionist Action Committee for unfurling banners that always say the same thing: "STOP EXECUTIONS!"

As these abolitionists were not carrying identification with them, after they were arrested, almost half of the fourteen participants in this last incident when asked their names by authorities calmly said "I am Troy Davis." One of the protesters who refused to reveal his true identity named Scott Langley said, "In the wake of Troy Davis's wrongful execution in Georgia this past September, I felt it

was necessary to bring the name of Troy Davis back to the U.S. Supreme Court so that Troy's name would once again haunt the court that failed to stop the execution of an innocent man. I also wanted the name Troy Davis to be a permanent alias on my criminal record as a reminder to myself of what our justice system is capable of."

Conclusion

White supremacy struck again in September of 2011 with the execution of Troy Davis in Georgia. But the violence of his execution, despite serious doubts about his guilt, generated an unprecedented flood of opposition both to his execution and to the death penalty itself. Troy Davis was named one of *Time Magazine's* People Who Mattered in 2011, and the story became a *Time Magazine* top ten U.S. news story of the year. It was also the second most Tweeted story in 2011 (based on Tweets-per-second). Even some conservatives, the core of support for the death penalty, came out vocally against his execution. The highly visible conservative pundit Kathleen Parker called capital punishment an abomination. She wrote: "When we join together to administer death, we become something other than a civilized community of men and women. No matter how we frame the arguments or justifications, we become executioners." Here we see the echo of both Camus and Wilson Gilmore's sentiments guiding us toward an antiracist people's geography.

On September 21, 2011 scores of people amassed around the world to protest the killing of Troy Davis. Peaceful gatherings were the most visible sign that opponents of capital punishment were trying to generate more solidarity and more of a presence to reverse the racist traditions that persist. Despite this, there were forty-three executions in 2012 and thirty-nine in 2013. While astonishing at some level, this number was nearly half as many executions as there were in the year 2000 which indicates progress within the abolition movement. Death sentences are delivered 30% less of the time currently than since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976.

As Nicholas M. Parker (2013) discusses, seventeen U.S. States and the District of Columbia have abolished the death penalty for all crimes. Five of these states have only abolished capital punishment since 2004, which suggests an important increase in the pace of abolition. A looming question that Parker posits is how many more states must abolish the death penalty, and at what pace, for the U.S. Supreme Court to determine that a national consensus has developed against its use? Parker also poses the question "How much longer until the Supreme Court agrees with Justice Blackmun that 'the death penalty experiment has failed'?"

Given in its most naked form the death penalty is about the power of the state to kill who it sees fit, even in the face of looming questions, thinking through the white-supremacist history of the death penalty is an important moment to understand how the case of Troy Davis can elucidate a larger abolitionist politics and help build an antiracist people's geography. Through Garrisonian style direct

action and agitation meant to symbolically communicate abolitionist politics it seems that the image of Troy Davis can continue to inspire, continue to inform and continue to help us all think about what is at stake when we discuss an antiracist people's geography when we passively allow a state that has blood dripping from its hands and white supremacy clouding its past to make violence in our names.

Inspired by the biblical passage Isaiah 49 8-11, in his *Prayer for Dark People* collection edited by Herbert Aptheker, W.E.B. DuBois (1980: 36) wrote his famous passage: "Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow. Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the playtime." For DuBois, as Aptheker suggests in an introductory essay, this was written not in a militant tone while agitating for a more egalitarian society. Rather it conveyed a more general ethic born out of generations and lifetimes of struggle. Sometimes it seems only agitation can inspire such injustices to be seen as such. As Troy Davis requested in his final words, in a state like Georgia if we are to "continue to fight this fight" we must continue to develop a new set of abolitionist politics to not fail the next person on death row and an antiracist people's geography must certainly be a part of how this can be accomplished.

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