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Has the 2016 Election Institutionalized Systemic Social Exclusion and Violence in America—and Perhaps Paved the Way for Authoritarianism and the Possible “Social Death” of Groups Perceived as Undesirable to the New Administration in Washington?

Aliza Luft

“**O**ur institutions will save us.” This phrase, repeated time and again as reassurance in the face of mounting uncertainty following the 2016 presidential election, is not without merit. America has long prided itself on the stability of its institutions—on the stability of its democracy and the assumption that its institutions function to undergird, serve, and protect it. However, when the question of social death emerges, we must ask ourselves:

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whom have our institutions historically served, whom have our institutions historically excluded, and how, given the clear and unflinching evidence that some groups are more desirable to the new administration in Washington than others, can we learn from the past to confront the present and shore up our institutions so that they are truly representative of all who live in America in the future? In the following essay, I will answer these questions while making historical comparisons with social death mechanisms in the United States. I will then argue that although we are at risk of normalizing further and regressive efforts to produce the social death of victimized subgroups, not only have such efforts never been able to succeed due to the active, constant, and creative resistance of targeted populations, but also perhaps this new phase in which the current administration is preying on so many categories of people simultaneously is presenting us with an opportunity to expand our ideas of Americanness and to ensure that our institutions protect us all.

What Is Social Death?

Social death is a term originally conceived by the sociologist Orlando Patterson to describe the peculiar violence of slavery, which, according to him, was distinct for its denial of personhood via the persistent destruction of social relationships, including natal and genealogical ties.¹ Though often interpreted to describe the existential condition of the enslaved, in recent years, scholars have sought to examine social death as a *process* and *experience* and not a state of being.² Following this, the concept of social death has become more useful as a theory of power and domination than as a characterization of the everyday lives of living, breathing subjugated individuals. In turn, there has been a boom in research that examines the mechanisms that function to produce social death as well as the strategies of victimized populations to resist such violence through brave efforts to “make social meaning from the threat of anomie.”³ Below, I briefly describe three of these mechanisms and historic efforts to defy them before turning to assess their persistence in, and legacy for, the current political context.

The process of social death comprises three mechanisms: first, the dispossession of individuals of their meaningful social relationships and histories;⁴ second, the classification of individuals into groups on the basis of inferior traits deemed inherent and immutable;⁵ and third, the construction of systems and institutions that serve to

separate subjugated bodies in physical space—be it in plantations, ghettos, camps, reservations, or prisons. As shorthand, we can refer to these three mechanisms as extraction, essentialization, and segregation. Combined, they aim to produce the demolition of people’s baseline rights to equal personhood within society. Following this, when we define the social death process as a concatenation of mechanisms that serve to totally subjugate entire categories of persons by denying them their heritage, relegating them to an innately inferior status, and separating them from the rest of the population, it becomes clear that social death processes and resistant actions to oppose them have been central to American politics since the founding of the United States itself.

Whom Have Our Institutions Historically Served? Whom Have Our Institutions Historically Excluded?

American democracy developed alongside the construction of racial ideology. Although slavery, indentured servitude, and other forms of unpaid labor were widespread in colonial America, it was the rise of republicanism—the idea that all men are created equal and freedom is their natural state of being—that necessitated justifying the lack of equality and freedom for enslaved Africans whose bodies had been transformed into property.⁶ Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields explain: “[An] ideology of racial inferiority” emerged in the United States with “the incorporation of Africans and their descendants into a polity and society in which they lacked rights that others not only took for granted, but claimed as a matter of self-evident natural law.”⁷ In turn, the ideology of race—the essentializing component of social death—undergirded the creation of America’s political system, with institutionalized discrimination at its core. It is not surprising, then, that our political institutions continue to privilege whiteness and systematically disadvantage anyone classified as racially *other*. The relationship, however, between past and present is not direct: “Racism,” Fields and Fields write sharply, “is not a material entity . . . that you can hand down like an old garment, pass on like a germ, spread like a rumor, or impose like a code of dress or etiquette.”⁸ Rather, it is created and recreated constantly through the ongoing interaction of historical processes with contemporary politics. I will return to this dynamic further on in my assessment of how (or indeed, whether) the 2016 election has paved the way for the possible social death of groups perceived as undesirable to the new administration in Washington.

For now, however, it is important to note that race is not the only essentializing ideology nor racism the only discriminatory practice foundational to the establishment of American democracy. Indeed, women too had few if any political, legal, or economic rights during the revolutionary era. African women, like African men, were extracted from their communities, classified as commodities, and stripped wholly of their “inalienable rights,” while white women—though neither deprived of their natal social ties nor forcibly segregated and therefore never fully subject to the brunt of all three social death mechanisms—were subjects of a patriarchal system that required women to be subordinate to male heads of households. The advent of republicanism, again with its ideals of equality and freedom, inspired some women to fight for equal rights. Yet, once more, debates over citizenship and the drafting of constitutional laws by propertied white men led to the growth of so-called rational (read: scientific), enlightened ideas about the inherent differences of women that made them “unfit” for politics. White women counted only in relation to the men in their lives, they were essentialized as innately weak, emotional, and illogical, and these relational and conceptual schemes were used to justify systemic discrimination against white women by relegating them to the domestic sphere.

Finally, though of no less significance, American history and the construction of American democracy developed in tandem with symbolic, physical, and structural violence against immigrants, religious minorities, other racialized minorities, and the poor. At each turn, various mechanisms of social death were institutionalized to subjugate these victimized populations. But as we know, there was always resistance and the story is not all negative. There are, as a result, two Americas. First, there is the xenophobic America of 1840s nativist mob violence, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882–1943, the Ku Klux Klan (founded in the 1860s and continuing to thrive in various formations in waves), Japanese internment during World War II, the New Right, McCarthyism, the Tea Party, and so on. Second, however, is the America eloquently expressed by the lofty ideals inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, from “The New Colossus,” a poem written by the feminist Jewish socialist immigrant Emma Lazarus. This is America “the Mother of Exiles,” America of “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” America for “the wretched refuse,” “the homeless,” “the tempest-tost.” Lazarus’s vision of America is what we channel when we call forth our better angels and recall the abolitionist movement, women’s suffrage and multiple waves of feminist movements, the civil rights movement, and now Black Lives Matter,

El Movimiento, the labor movement, the gay rights movement and ongoing LGBTQ activism, and so on. These movements, and the people who organized and constituted them, *are a part of American history, too*. But it would be naive to forget America's other, darker past and to consider the current administration's oblique and blatant gestures toward Christian white male heteronormative supremacy as an aberration in American politics. Oddly enough, this should give us hope.

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Resistance in the Face of Social Death

The full social death of victimized subgroups has never been able to succeed. In response to extraction, essentialization, and segregation, there has always been resistance. The shapes and forms of action to oppose the social death process have varied: cultural preservation and innovation; everyday defiance and recalcitrance; diverse efforts at (re)building community and family; even organized revolt—the threat of social death has always generated resistance in response. As a result, we would do well to observe Vincent Brown's recommendation that we analyze social death as a "productive peril" even in our current political context where the threat of laws, rules, and policies that aim to isolate, define, and separate subsets of the population loom so large.⁹ Following this line of thought, and with reference to Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery* (2007), we can perhaps find comfort in how Brown describes the women on the slave ship *Hudibras* who protested and mourned the death of one of their sisters as "not in fact the living dead ... [but] the mothers of gasping new societies."¹⁰ These words, and this history, should inspire us.

In fact, if we are truly to heed the lessons of the past, perhaps we ought to shift our perspective to see that in the face of old and new attempts at social death we are currently being presented with a historic occasion to radically alter our country. Underlying each mechanism of social death is the goal of short-circuiting alliances by convincing people that meaningful distinctions separate them, in turn prohibiting a broader struggle by all for all. This is a key reason why, despite rising economic inequality, persistent police racism and violence, mounting Islamophobia, antisemitism, sexual prejudice, and homophobia, as well as ongoing efforts to strip women's rights to control their own bodies, and more, it has been so difficult to mobilize sustained opposition. Our alliances have been divided and our targets have been vague.

Yet maybe, in a perverse way, Trump's equal-opportunity offending is providing the rest of us "losers" with an opening to ally more broadly than ever before. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, notes that Trump's attacks are deep and wide, and we "need a mass movement to confront" them.¹¹ Elsewhere she explains, "the anxieties, stresses, confusions, and frustrations about life [in the] world today are not owned by one group, but are shared by many."¹² That we see ourselves and our suffering as divided is a consequence of social death processes. The current administration, however, is inadvertently forcing these cleavages to dissolve. Increasingly, we are witnessing the growth of an intersectional movement that, though not perfect, certainly is reviving the social—that is to say, it is creating new communities and reviving solidarities that have been pulled apart since the founding of this country. Thus, although the America of Trump is neither novel nor new, the America that is created via resistance to his regime may, once and for all, be truly revolutionary. "Social death," sociologist Avery F. Gordon writes, is "something we do that can and must be stopped."¹³ Now is the time to take on this battle.

Notes

I am grateful to Simon Balto, Karida Brown, Marcus Hunter, and Jared McBride for their feedback on previous versions of this article.

- 1 Patterson describes this unique condition of enslavement, which distinguishes social death from physical death, as follows: "The heart of what is critical in the slave's forced alienation" is "the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. . . . It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of 'blood,' and from any attachment to groups or loyalties other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave this relationship of slavery its peculiar value to the master." As for the distinction between social and physical death, Patterson writes: "Perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death." Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 5, 7. Significantly, Marion Kaplan has also written about social death; however, there are two important differences between Patterson's conceptualization of social death and Kaplan's usage of the term, also popular and worth mentioning here. Both Patterson and

Kaplan agree that social death entails (1) excommunication from the social community, (2) subjection to an inferior status, and (3) relegation to a perpetual state of dishonor. What distinguishes the scholars' approaches is (a) Patterson argues that "natal alienation"—denial of claims to family and other living blood relations as well as denial of ancestry/heritage—is central to the concept of social death, whereas for Kaplan, social death does not include separation from genealogical ties but only ties to "friends, neighbors, clients, and employers" of a different "racial community"; and (b) Patterson asserts that social death is explicitly intended to serve the purpose of total domination *without* physical death, whereas Kaplan proposes that social death is intended to lay the groundwork for physical death to come. Additionally, Kaplan herself notes that there are significant differences between her use of the term *social death* and Patterson's original conceptualization of the phrase when she writes: "Orlando Patterson introduced the term 'social death' to describe the slave condition. . . . A history of Jews in Nazi Germany illustrates many similarities (with important differences)"; however, Kaplan does not detail these differences in her book; see Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 1998), 5, 9, 229, 239 n. 2. Through a close comparison of both texts, I have determined that it is important to stick strictly to the American context in the analysis provided here, because the peculiar aspects of social death processes tied to the history of slavery in the United States are so distinct and, in my opinion, ought not to be subsumed under the experiences of Jews in Nazi Germany but analyzed and considered in their own right for the insights they can shed on the current American political context.

- 2 See Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1235, for a discussion of how research on social death tends to distinguish between "hopeful stories of heroic subalterns versus anatomies of doom" and how a useful way forward is to examine the diverse experiences of enslaved persons who have had to confront social death processes. A similar argument is made by historian Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, Conn., 2012), 1–35.
- 3 Brown, "Social Death," 1232. For examples of some recent scholarship that specifically examines resistance to social death in the context of slavery, see R. J. M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2013); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection* (Bloomington, Ind., 2012); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); Keith Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom:*

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African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad (Lexington, Ky., 2004); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Dylan C. Penningroth, “The Claims of Slaves and Ex-Slaves to Family and Property: A Transatlantic Comparison,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (2007): 1039–69; and James H. Sweet, “Defying Social Death: The Multiple Configurations of African Slave Family in the Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2013): 251–72.

- 4 See n. 1 for the centrality of dispossession to Patterson’s concept of social death. To further elucidate what Patterson means by this, however, we can look to other scholars in a variety of disciplines who have expounded on his idea. For example, Paul Gilroy describes the mechanism of extraction as the “banishment of historicity”; Dorothy Roberts defines it as the production of “human property without any claims of birth or connection to relatives, past, present, or future”; and Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley explain that the concept of social death denotes that “the slave has no social status or human ties beyond his identity as an extension, and property, of the master.” In each of these articulations, the main point is that dispossession of meaningful social ties and relationships is a central characteristic of the social death process and this, in fact, is what makes it social—the violence is that of natal alienation with no relationships recognized as legitimate or binding. See Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago, 1987), 280; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, 1998), 45; and Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, Colo., 2012), 154. Significantly—and again understanding social death not as a condition of being but rather as a process that aims to *bring about* this condition—Patterson explains, “when we say that the slave was natally alienated and ceased to belong independently to any formally recognized community, this does not mean that he or she did not experience or share informal social relations. . . . The important point, however, is that these relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding”; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 6.
- 5 The classification of individuals as inherently and immutably inferior is widely considered to be a form of dehumanization and thus central to the process of social death. This mechanism is dehumanizing because it denies a person their own distinct identity separate from the category to which they have been assigned, and it is part of the social death process because it rationalizes the subjection of a population to a subordinate status on the basis of these fabricated biological grounds.
- 6 Saidiya Hartman describes this mechanism of social death powerfully when she writes: “Seized from home, sold in the market, and severed from kin, the slave was for all intents and purposes dead, no less so than

had he been killed in combat. No less so than had she never belonged to the world. . . . Slavery annulled lives, transforming men and women into dead matter, then resuscitated them for servitude”; see Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007), 68.

- 7 Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York, 2012), 128. See also Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 143–77.
- 8 Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 128.
- 9 Brown, “Social Death,” 1248.
- 10 Ibid., 1241, and see Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).
- 11 Keeanaga-Yamahtta Taylor, “How to Build a Mass Movement,” *Jacobin Magazine*, Jan. 24, 2017, accessed Feb. 5, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/womens-march-dc-trump-protests-inauguration/>. This argument builds on chapter 6 of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, 2016).
- 12 Keeanaga-Yamahtta Taylor, “No Time for Despair,” *Jacobin Magazine*, Jan. 28, 2017, accessed Feb. 5, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/trump-black-lives-racism-sexism-anti-inauguration/>. Again, for further elaboration, see Taylor, *From Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*.
- 13 Avery Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 17.

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