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Estranged Fruit: Making and Unmaking in Mississippi's Jails

Barry Gildea

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A careless shoestring, in whose tie I see a wild civility.

—Robert Herrick

STARTING ON A SHOESTRING

Exhibit One: Andre Jones¹

At 4:10 a.m. on Saturday, August 22, 1992, police bring Andre Jones, 18, to the Simpson County Jail. He is detained on a series of charges including carrying a concealed weapon, violating the city beer ordinance, possessing a stolen 1991 Chevrolet extended cab S-10 pickup, and altering the vehicle identification number. Early Saturday evening, Jones expresses his concern to one of his eleven cell mates, Garrison Spann, that he might have to serve time in prison if convicted. Spann says he doubts it, that probation is a more likely punishment. At 11:15 p.m., Spann and another inmate spy Jones's half-clothed body in a corner stall of the shower, his hands down by his side. Spann says to Jones, "Hey dude, you can't take a shower with your pants on." Spann touches him. "He kind of pulled back," Spann remembers. "Felt to me like he had moved." Spann leaves. He returns when Jones still has not come out of the shower. Then it dawns on Spann that something isn't right. In the short time of twenty hours, on the same Saturday in the same cell in which he was first placed, Andre Jones is discovered dead. Simpson County Sheriff Lloyd Jones announces to the press that

Andre Jones hanged himself with a black shoestring from one of his Nike high-top sneakers. According to preliminary reports, Jones tied one part of the shoestring to the chrome shower bar, the other part to his neck. He squatted so as not to break the tension, cut off his circulation, and suffocated himself to death. Spann, who slept beside the shower door, says no one else passed by him, and he discerned no struggle. The sheriff also reports that no evidence indicates that Jones was slain. Early results from the autopsy reveal death by asphyxiation, showing no bruises other than the mark around Jones's neck. It seems an open-and-shut case of suicide, starkly consisting of fiber, metal, flesh, and will.

Yet Andre Jones's family members question the shape and nature of Jones's sudden death. "We're in disbelief that this has happened to our son," says his mother, Ester Jones-Quinn. "We are very much angry at the injustice he has received." Jones's mother and stepfather, Charles X Quinn, order a second autopsy performed. Mrs. Jones-Quinn says her son was not despairing when she spoke to him during the brief time he was in jail. At a news conference, their attorneys, Chokwe Lumumba and Barry Howard, contend that Andre Jones was murdered. Lumumba declares that "authorities at the Simpson County Jail" are the primary suspects. Lumumba says that Jones was murdered for two reasons: his race, and the prominence of his parents within the black community of Mississippi. Jones's mother is president of the Jackson branch of the NAACP, his stepfather the minister of the local Nation of Islam mosque. Lumumba says that Jones's parents are "not liked by racist authorities of the state and they are not liked by racist authorities who work for the state." Neither the parents nor the attorneys trust in the ability of the local officials to administer justice. An FBI spokesman reports that the bureau will conduct "a preliminary inquiry into the events surrounding Jones's death." This inquiry later backs up the local authorities' ruling of Jones's death as a suicide. Yet the family persists, hoping for answers that will conform to their expectations.

They find them in the report of Dr. James Bryant of Chicago. Hired by the Nation of Islam, Bryant performs a second autopsy. He concludes that Andre Jones's hanging was not a suicide but a "classic textbook case of murder," part of a canon of race murder in Mississippi with which it is in historical continuity.

The Sublime Skein of Pain

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

—Kahlil Gibran

The dispute over Jones's body can best be described by terms introduced by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. In vivid, well-documented accounts, Scarry describes how the infliction and avoidance of pain respectively destroys and creates human reality. The deconstructive force Scarry calls "unmaking" is a disintegration of human reality achieved by both the infliction of physical pain and the fragmentary, unstable, and manipulable means of describing such inflictions. It is the process by

which reality becomes completely embodied, both by intense pain and by the accompanying destruction of language. The political consequence of pain's problematic expressibility is that the body becomes not only the target of ideology but also the limit.

If Andre Jones were lynched, then the hanging would conform to Scarry's notion of unmaking. His death by hanging would conflate pain with power in a way that is crucial to the concept of unmaking: language would fail to articulate or represent either pain's subject or its referent. What Andre Jones's pain expressed, or whether it ever even existed at all, is a mystery, part of the legacy of doubt engendered by any account of pain. For Andre Jones, jail hanging may have been a somatic form of cultural criticism, attesting to the incontestable reality of the pain and torture of Mississippi jails. But as Scarry would predict, the "language" of this hanging event is not entirely clear. You cannot be sure what the hanging is "saying" about the pain of the inmate. This linguistic problem calls into question the source and agency of Jones's unmaking.

Scarry's work emphasizes the importance of reading the body as a text, a valuable approach to the story of Jones's death. The posture of Andre Jones emphasizes the body in a way that cancels the contents of the world: the suspension of a body from the shower bar, dangling like fruit, fleshy, pulpy, a liquefying solid. The human involved is reduced from a sentient being into a mere body, matter, the object of gravity's pull. In the case of Jones, a single shoestring unmakes the made, for in his world shoes were both a possession of status and a position of plight, as in "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes." His hanging synthesizes each connotation so that the plight of pain becomes objectified and he becomes, like a shoe, something that dangles from a string. Andre Jones the sentient being disappears and is represented by a black Nike hightop sneaker, the kind young urban blacks sometimes kill for.² Because of shoes, some urban teenagers kill others; by means of shoes, do some jailed urban teenagers kill themselves? Andre Jones did not kill for shoes but instead died by means of them, his Mississippi-made body transformed into both a shoe and a field of crisis. Unfortunately for Mississippi, however, the hanging of Andre Jones has the appearance of bearing the antecedent state insignia of lynching.

"Making" is a more diffuse term in Scarry's lexicon than unmaking. According to Scarry, pain is the *prima materia*, the first matter, the psycho-physiological substance out of which all expressive efforts are born. In the nature of pain lies the key to understanding both human creativity and human destructiveness. All forms of human creativity arise from the initial problem of articulating physical pain. The body finds signs and signifiers to represent, substitute, alleviate, or preempt its pain. Scarry labels such solutions as makings. According to Scarry, the interconnectedness of pain and creation is as present in a pencil, a chair, or an artificial heart as it is in the *Federalist Papers*, the Marshall Plan, or the Old Testament.

Could this same interconnectedness also be seen in a jail hanging? Scarry does not say. Puzzlingly, the deliberate assumption of pain through martyrdom, masochism, flagellation, or suicide is excluded from her work. Yet throughout human history, suicide has been variously described in terms of both making and unmaking. While "unmaking" explanations for suicide far exceed those of

making, writers such as French drama theorist Antonin Artaud have described the creative potential of suicide: "If I commit suicide it will not be to destroy myself but to put myself back together again. By suicide, I reintroduce my design in nature, I shall for the first time give things the shape of my will" (57). Scarry views violence mainly as a matter of wounding the body or bodies of an actual or perceived human enemy. By contrast, suicides do not fit neatly into the category of either victim or interrogator but instead house them simultaneously in one body. Scarry excludes this possibility of enemy and victim being one and the same. Because of its strange conflation of the experiences of injuring and being injured, suicide marks an exception to Scarry's definition of unmaking. Though the result of suicide inevitably involves modification of the body, the fundamental goal of suicide may not be to wound at all. In fact, a suicide may be more significant in its alleviation of spiritual pain than in its creation or expression of physical pain. Thus, suicide does not completely fit the "unmaking" models of war and torture that Scarry provides in her book.

According to Scarry, pain is alleviated by means of making, and suicide may be one of the few acts of creativity available to jail inmates. The meaning lies in the making. The interpretive challenge of jail suicide is this: given that Scarry makes pain the point of departure for acts of making and unmaking alike, and given that a jail hanging is a departure achieved through pain, should we see that departure as an unmaking? A making? Both? Neither? Does the significance of a jail suicide lie mainly in what is unmade or what is made? Before these questions can be answered, however, you must decide who was responsible for the hanging itself, a determination of "authorship" that has political as well as narrative implications.

The uncertainty of Andre Jones's death produces radically different ramifications depending upon whether you interpret Jones's hanging as a lynching or a suicide. Whatever you believe his end to be changes the way in which you see his world, and yours. If Jones were lynched, his Mississippi incarceration can be read as an act of revenge performed by and before the scrutinizing eyes of modern surveillance. If Andre Jones committed suicide, he did so without either a dramatic rhetorical moment or a suicide note, thus forcing you to make sense of his death, drawing you into his world, his cell. If Jones's hanging is a suicide, then it is a strange and extrinsic interstice between making and unmaking, as all suicides are.³ By resisting the urge to determine and dictate the meaning of his death, Jones has insured that he will be heard. He imposes no meaning, but still "imprisons" you within a text, a world of his own (un)making, a world which soon becomes peopled with the texts of other hanging bodies.

Using the shoestring of Andre Jones as an Ariadne's thread, investigative reporters from the Jackson *Clarion Ledger* revealed forty-three more hangings in the labyrinth of Mississippi's city and county jail system from 1987 to 1992. During this period, the suicide rate for Mississippi jails alarmingly doubled, from 3.5 to nearly seven per year. They occurred in thirty-five counties, with an almost even distribution of black and white males, an equal number of black and white females, and ages ranging from 14 to 58. In part because of the bitter dueling over the reading of the Andre Jones hanging, the authorities' solid

consensus that all forty-four jail deaths were open-and-shut cases of suicide came completely unhinged. On April 13, 1993, Attorney General Janet Reno announced that the Justice Department would make a thorough inquiry into all Mississippi jail hangings. After stating that the number of deaths was unacceptable, and that the investigation would get to the bottom of the question, she asked with obvious incredulity, "How could that many people die?" By the end of 1993, the number of hangings in the state's jails reached forty-nine.

Before issues of authorship could be resolved, the national media immediately tied these hangings to other twentieth-century episodes of violence that became symbols of the state. The media-imposed prehistory of the recent hangings begins with the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 and is followed by the bloody 1962 riots when James Meredith entered Ole Miss, the 1963 murder of Medgar Evers, the 1964 murders of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman in Neshoba County, the shooting of James Meredith during his 1966 walk from Memphis to Jackson, and the student killings at Jackson State in 1970 by highway patrollers and city police. Certain Mississippians and many of those who follow stories from the state read the jail hangings typologically, as revisitations of evils previously witnessed, previously fought. The suspicion that unconstitutional conditions of confinement may have played a major role in the latest violence sounds a theme of the injustice of place and the discrimination against people common to all of these critical Mississippi texts.

But the truth of the recent rash of jail hangings is not self-evident, because the disputed source of their power makes the ritualization of truth impossible. These hangings do not exhibit continuity with the historical narrative in several important ways. First, in none of the other violent actions was self-immolation even a possibility; the civil-rights-era individuals who died in Mississippi were almost all murdered. The jail locations themselves also differ from the other prominent sites of Mississippi violence: most of the civil-rights-era riots and murders occurred in open, outdoor places such as public roads or publicly funded college campuses, whereas the recent rash of hangings all took place inside the cramped and secluded confines of jail cells. Because jails are also publicly funded extensions of the Mississippi judicial system, the recent violence has in some sense again been underwritten by the state's taxpayers. But the jail hangings seem perhaps even more incriminating, because they imply an even greater systematic suffocation of human rights, perpetrated upon individuals more at the mercy of the state than most poor sharecroppers of the Delta ever were. The jail hangings have violently terminated the due process of law in which an inmate's arrest would normally lead to his conviction or exoneration. Arrests typically occur against the will of the individuals, who are temporarily detained by coercive means that are at least implicitly painful. Jail hangings, then, irrespective of their cause, can also be read as involving a shift from temporary to permanent detention. As such they are the ultimate betrayal of *habeas corpus*, upon which the hangings punningly signify. All in all, the story, regardless of the ending you provide, is unique in Mississippi history.

Deaths in penal institutions can be of extraordinary significance. Issues of prison conditions and prison death helped create Mississippi and much of the

lower South. The death of Robert Castell in Fleet Prison inspired James Edward Oglethorpe to attempt to reform the English prison system and later to provide a haven for the deserving poor in the colony of Georgia (see Baine), which included the land mass of what is now the state of Mississippi. While the recent Mississippi jail hangings may not inspire so grand a design as the creation of a new colony, they do reveal a great deal about the shape and nature of jails in Mississippi as well as the concessions a subject makes, and does not make, when placed inside a jail.

Deconstruction of the Fables

Stories with uncertainties can be read and even resolved without devolving into stalemated rancor. Truth must be pursued circuitously, beyond the rigid realm of historical objectivity. This suggests that the task of reconstructing and evaluating the critical moments in the history of the jail hangings will demand an imagination open to both literary and historical insight. Three particular jail hangings offer a breadth of interpretive possibilities: Andre Jones, David Scott Campbell, and Ronald B. Berryhill. While these three narratives cannot be considered to offer unmediated reality (as represented here they depend heavily on newspaper reporting), they are nonetheless a powerful reminder that the facts of the story are grounded in the actual hanging deaths of forty-nine jailed men and women. By exploring three prototypical hangings, you may be able to see certain patterns emerge about the subject and significance of jail hangings in Mississippi.

The only common denominator you are provided with at the outset is the repeated deed of hanging inside Mississippi jails. Along with "Mississippi," which will receive explicit attention later, the two words of paramount importance here are "jail" and "hanging." Both are commonly used as nouns and verbs, which is significant. A jail is "a facility under local jurisdiction of counties or municipalities which lawfully detains inmates awaiting trial or sentencing, or serving terms of typically less than one year" (Deheer 71). The focus here will be exclusively on jails rather than prisons. The basic distinction between the two is that jails almost never have reformatory goals. Their purpose is purely to incarcerate those who have committed or have been accused of committing crimes. A jailing demands a mutual acquiescence to a specific hegemonic order. Concessions are made but are limited. There is a locking, literally and ideologically, into conditions both defined and indulged by the jailer.

A hanging is the act and result of killing by a suspending by the neck. There is a sense of perpetuity contained within the concept of hanging derived from the quality of suspending, which connotes physical movement and a lack of movement as well as uncertainty. Hanging strictly implies neither murder nor accident nor suicide but includes all three judgments, since the subjects, whether voluntarily or not, are made complicit in their deaths by their own weight, the mass of their bodies feeling gravity's pull. As a jail hanging, you are held up and strung up indefinitely. You simultaneously evoke a bringing into and a nullification of your existence.

THE UNMAKING DETECTIVE

The suspensory and therefore contingent nature of hanging suggests that multiple readings of the hangings should be discerned and scrutinized for their plausibility. Because every aspect of a prisoner's life in jail is regulated and controlled by jailhouse authorities, it is not surprising that "unmaking" interpretations have permeated every aspect of this Mississippi story. But by far the most sensational and widely explored of these unmaking-oriented explanations are the theories of lynching.

Billie Holiday once sang in haunting protest to lynching, "Southern trees bear strange fruit." She sang out against those who shed the blood of their neighbors. The recent Mississippi hangings occur in the forbidding metal wood of the state penal system. The new southern trees are jails, their limbs and branches shower bars and bunk beds, their fruit an equal distribution of black and white bodies. In the context of these jail hangings, a lynching interpretation can be loosely defined as a conspiracy theory that claims that direct or indirect actions of Mississippi law enforcement officials resulted in the hangings of the detainees. Lynching has one great narrative advantage over all rival interpretations: it can exploit a ready-made paradigm by constructing these jail deaths as an historical and symbolic continuation of past regional injustices, including slavery. From the South Carolina Regulators to John Lynch's Pittsylvanians to the present, lynchings have been an accepted and characteristic part of the criminal justice system in the South (Bodenhamer 22). The invocation of lynch law was a vigilante form of law enforcement which usually usurped the role of the formal authorities and often resulted in the hanging of the individual or group considered lawless. Many of the victims of lynching were kidnapped from jail cells where they were awaiting legal arraignment and/or prosecution; black prisoners especially have served in this way as cheap signifiers of white southern power and authority. Mississippi earned a reputation as a setting of domination for the tide of savagery unleashed upon the black population there. In southwest Mississippi in the 1890s, Whitecappers terrorized blacks and merchants as a result of agricultural depression. According to the NAACP's *Thirty Years of Lynching In the United States, 1889-1918*, Mississippi ranked second over this period in terms of the number of lynchings with 373 victims, 94 percent of whom were of African origin.⁴

Since prisoners are citizens, and since citizens are ostensibly the beneficiaries of the guardianship provided by the state penal system (by jailers and their ilk), when anyone dies in a prison or jail by means other than natural causes, the state has failed to perform a basic custodial function. This failure is perfectly summarized by Dr. Bryant, who performed the second autopsy on Andre Jones at the request of his family. Bryant said that regardless of whether the death of Andre Jones was a homicide, "the guy goes into jail not convicted of anything and winds up dead" (*Clarion Ledger*, 17 March 1993). Once you admit that governments are responsible for their inmates, you can begin to challenge jail deaths, not only as failures of the system but sometimes as permitted, desired, and/or deliberately engineered failures. This conclusion becomes more credible when the frequency of jail deaths increases to many

times the norm. Injustice is a social offense of the powerful, and a plethora of prisoner hangings occurring in state, county, and city penal institutions does indeed appear as an injustice for which sheriffs and other jail overseers are culpable.

Lynching theory's major flaw is less its factual plausibility than its tendency to answer the questions surrounding the jail deaths a priori and in a manner that deems only a small amount of the overarching text essential. Lynching theorists advance as the ur-text of the recent hangings the 1964 deaths of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, which as we have seen have glaring differences from the forty-nine jail hangings. As an explanation for the jail hangings, lynching theory is a contemporary misapplication of Mississippi civil-rights history.

Lynching theorists deny all the inmates in question the capacity for self-assertion, assuming their complete innocence, robbing them of the potential authorship of their own "texts," both their own bodies and the narratives that follow the actions on and of these bodies. Lynching theorists discount the possibility of suicide because they believe that the act of suicide, both inside and outside of jail, indicates a submission to (white) power. Dr. Bryant, for instance, was reading Andre Jones's body not for the victim's story but for a story of victimization. If Jones were a suicide, then the reading of his hanging as a lynching would amount to a theft of authorship, a near cousin to Roland Barthes's famous "death of the author." Such thefts occur when control over meaning is stripped away from the text's actual author and conferred upon another human source. In the specific case of the jail hangings, such an interpretive move would take advantage of the fact that hanging is part of the classic structure of lynching. Lynching interpreters may recapitulate this theft of authorship by reading the hangings in the light of their own subjective concerns and then putting their reading to their own personal uses. An overemphasis on civil-rights events of the past creates the probability of a misreading of present events that may only have similar surface appearances.

But the single greatest problem posed by a theory of lynching is the lack of mobs. Most of the forty-nine hangings occurred in the deep of night, between watches, away from the probing, accusing eyes of guards, some of whom were too afraid even to walk down jail halls after "lights out."⁵ At least in the larger urban jails of Mississippi, the jail cell is an unlikely site for an inmate lynching by jail authorities. In the present Mississippi jail story, you have a constituency considered "lawless" (irrespective of their criminal status) in the forty-nine inmates, a constituency that indeed winds up hanged, but you do not have either the vigilantes or the justification for vigilantism as a defense of community values. This is a crucial absence.

With the investigation of Andre Jones and the other black inmate hangings, perhaps the would-be reformers of Mississippi hoped that the ghosts of the past would be forever exorcised. But a conspiracy theory that ignores or distorts factual data is less a hypothesis than a form of rage, an emotional method of explaining the sources of the author's own misery. This theory has abstracted the villains, so that all of white Mississippi is implicated as a mob.

Deaths by Deficiencies

If a soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., quoting Victor Hugo

For the vast majority of prison inmates, opportunities to criticize or even change the system are beyond reach. This may be even more true of jails, which have less structural and cultural cohesion than prisons, due largely to smaller populations, higher inmate turnover rates, and architectural differences such as smaller cells and enclosed cell blocks with long halls. Two major revelations these jail hangings produced were the insufficient suicide-prevention procedures and the gross physical inadequacies of Mississippi's city and county jails. These two factors form a second category of other-inflicted deaths, one that overlays suicide: deaths by deficiencies. Deficiencies can broadly be divided into those of place and those of procedure. Deficiencies of place include architectural problems such as poorly designed cell blocks or structural flaws such as bars, hooks, and vent pipes from which a person can easily hang himself or herself. Deficiencies of procedure include errors such as the single celling of suicidal inmates, the lack of mental health training for jailers, and the lack of suicide-prevention standards. Not surprisingly, Mississippi was found to be terribly deficient in both place and procedure.

In May of 1993, the Justice Department launched a formal investigation of the eighteen Mississippi city and county jails alleged to have the worst facilities. The investigation, conducted through July, included "on-site inspections of each facility, a critique of jail procedures, review of suicide incident reports, and interviews with both staff and inmates" (Hayes 2). The conditions in all eighteen facilities were found to be substandard and in violation of the US Constitution. In Jones County, the inspection team called the county's 56-year-old facility "unfit for human habitation due to its pervasive filth, serious state of longstanding neglect and significant deterioration" (*Clarion Ledger*, 20 October 1993). According to a *New York Times* article, the Justice Department found that plumbing flooded waste into cell blocks in some jails. The same article reported that inspectors at the Sunflower County Jail found "shower stalls 'crawling with roaches and insects,' maggots around toilets and wash basins, and rodent and roach droppings in stored food" (*New York Times*, 10 December 1993). Inadequacies at other jails ranged from racially segregated drunk tanks to life-threatening fire hazards. All eighteen facilities were cited as having grossly inadequate suicide prevention procedures. The overriding consensus of this unprecedented investigation was that the jail conditions in Mississippi were utterly deplorable: the Mississippi government had not only theoretically posited that even *alleged* criminals were the detritus of society, they had reinforced their belief system literalistically: with jails cells that flooded with human excrement and crawled with vermin. Investigators blamed much of the problem on a lack of state jail standards and inspection programs, for the only state-wide oversight for jails in Mississippi is the fire safety inspections. Currently, the only local mechanism for reviewing jails is the county grand jury.

But did any of the deficient entities — guards or jails — actually *kill* the prisoners? If the implied message to prisoners housed in cells infested with maggots is, “You are already dead in the eyes of society,” then does this message release these inmates of all responsibility for their own actions? If you hang yourself in a jail that is not “suicide-proof,” are you absolved and is the jail at fault? Returning briefly to the case of Andre Jones, the height of the shower bar from which Jones’s body was found was measured at 7 1/2 feet, not the eight or nine feet reported by Dr. James Bryant. This would eliminate the need for a chair or step stool (Jones had access to neither) and thus increase the probability that his death was due to his will alone rather than to the will of others. Also, Bryant maintained that the shoelace Jones used could not support his estimated weight of 160 pounds. According to Nike officials quoted in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, the minimum tensile strength of their shoelace is 150 pounds and the maximum 175 pounds. If Jones’s feet were on the ground, as has been argued by Dr. Steven Hayne, the Brandon pathologist who first ruled that Jones committed suicide, the shoelace would be supporting significantly less than his entire body weight. According to medical examiners at the Wayne County Jail, “It’s not necessary to have complete obstruction of a victim’s airway for death to occur. Two kilograms of pressure is required to stop the flow of blood to the brain. An adult’s head equals three kilograms. So, enough pressure is exerted if the victim simply stands, sits, or lies down” (Charle 52). The Simpson County district attorney, a grand jury, the US Department of Justice, the state attorney general, and the US Armed Forces Institute of Pathology⁶ have all concluded that Jones committed suicide.

No factual data has been presented by a credible body that supports the argument that any of the forty-nine jail hangings were lynchings, or that the environmental or procedural deficiencies of the jails were primarily responsible for the deaths of these inmates. Yet these theories have thrived in the fecund fields of injustice and unmaking in Mississippi history. Though prisoners hang in jails all across this country, illusory theories of conspiratorial unmaking needed Mississippi to take root and flourish.

The elemental ability of the body to negate itself through suicide renders to the marginalized not only access to external trappings of physical power but primal power over internalities, physical and psychological authority over their very bodies and minds. In this respect it is like other basic civil rights defined in bodily terms: eating in restaurants, drinking from water fountains, excreting in rest rooms, kissing, and copulating. If all the jail hangings are not coerced deaths, then they reiterate what most people, both black and white, do not want to hear: you cradle the power to unmake your life almost any time that you wish.

Exhibit Two: David Scott Campbell

Late on the night of October 9, 1990, Philadelphia, Mississippi, police officer Richard Sistrunk and his partner, Greg Donald, respond to a call from the Philadelphia Apartments requesting an investigation of gang activities there.

They find an African-American male, David Scott Campbell, 21, crouching in the bushes behind the complex in an area with the inimitable name of Shakey Ground. When Sistrunk and Donald run their routine check, they discover that Campbell has two outstanding arrest warrants, including a felony assault charge stemming from an incident in Meridian. They arrest him and bring him in to the Neshoba County Detention Center just before midnight. Because Campbell has been drinking and is behaving aggressively, Sistrunk places him in the holding cell known as the drunk tank. Before leaving, Sistrunk promises to let Campbell use the telephone if he calms down. Sistrunk then spends an hour with Donald patrolling businesses where a blown transformer has left much of the downtown area, including the jail, buried in prophetic darkness. At one a.m. on October 10, Sistrunk returns to the drunk tank to fulfill his promise. There he finds Campbell, one hour after he was locked up, dangling by his blue jeans from a cell bar approximately six feet off the ground, his lifeless head leaning forward into the crude noose. In a sworn affidavit, Neshoba County jailer Richard Jones says that he saw "Campbell's pants were off and he had tied one pants leg around a cell bar and the other around his neck. Campbell's belt was laying [sic] across his shoulder and did not appear to have been used by Campbell to hang himself." Dr. Steven Hayne, former state medical examiner, performs the autopsy, finding no cuts or bruises on Campbell's body. He rules the cause of death as strangulation, the type of death a suicide.

Street talk quickly pounces on the news of the hanging. Campbell was castrated, his tongue was cut out, his body was riddled with welts from beatings. Some say he was killed in the darkness of his cell. Others say it must have happened before he was brought to jail.

Campbell's friends and family refuse to believe the medical examiner's findings. David's aunt, Edna, claims that the autopsy failed to report a large bruise on Campbell's head and a split lip. Campbell's father, M. C., says he will go his grave believing his son didn't kill himself. Calling the Philadelphia police, grand jury, and FBI investigations a big charade, M. C. Campbell files a \$1.5 million lawsuit against both the Neshoba County sheriff and jailer Richard Jones, claiming his son's death was not a suicide. He says his son had no reason to kill himself. He was never lonely. He had a lot of girlfriends. One of them, his father believes, was his undoing. "He was killed by the police department for dating a white girl," M. C. testifies at a hearing organized by national civil rights groups.

David Scott Campbell was apparently dating a white Philadelphia woman named Nikki Griffin at the time of his death. Griffin is the daughter of Union, Mississippi, patrolman Dwight Griffin. The father claims never to have inquired into the nature of Campbell's friendship with Nikki.

Crouching on Shakey Ground

More than most of the Mississippi jail hangings, Campbell's text contains a motive for murder (alleged miscegenation), a historically regarded scene of unmaking (Neshoba County), an imbalance of power favoring the regime of

law enforcement, and an antagonistic relationship between the deceased and local law authorities. The tragic death of David Campbell indeed appears ripe for a verdict of unmaking, murder. On the other hand, every law-enforcement and independent agency that has studied Campbell's case has ruled that suicide was the cause of death.

But is it possible that at least one of the forty-nine subjects who suffocated via hanging came to his or her end incidentally rather than intentionally? In other words, could one of the inmates have known very clearly that he or she was going to die but have been pursuing the annihilation of something other than the self? Remember that the word "hanging" can imply an accident as easily as it can an execution, a lynching, or a suicide. Jails are sites for complex and plural readings, especially where contested hangings occur. The incidental death category marks the first opportunity to explore a more imaginative or creative interpretation of the jail hanging as a mythic and literary act of incidental annihilation through intentional civil disobedience.

Southern Samsons

"If I had my way, I would tear this old building down."
—Blind Willie Johnson, "Samson and Delilah"

Perhaps the most relevant paradigm for such a performance is the death of Samson. In the biblical version, located in the book of Judges (ch. 13-16), Samson's story is a myth about a young Israelite of extraordinary physical strength who breaks the prohibition against intermarriage and marries a daughter of the enemy Philistines. A felon in the eyes of both his own people and his inimical in-laws, the warrior Samson is captured by means of deceit, loses his source of strength, is blinded and finally jailed. While incarcerated, Samson's strength of faith and physique returns, but the curse of sin upon him remains. He recovers his subjecthood in jail but can triumph over his keepers only through his own death. In the biblical version of the story, the tragedy lies in the doubleness of Samson's death: Samson is rewarded for his final pledge of loyalty and obedience to God by a return of his strength sufficient to slay his enemies, but while vanquishing the Philistines he is also punished with death by God for his betrayal and infidelity. The biblical story is a beautiful allegory of lost honor and pride, and the extremity of revenge permitted an avenger of God for the restoration of spiritual as well as personal stature.

The Samson story forces you to confront definitions of suicide. On one hand, you can argue that Samson's remark "I shall fall into the hands of the uncircumcized" anticipates his own incarceration at the hands of his enemies (Judges 15:18, *Revised Standard Version*). His famous demand, "Let me die with the Philistines," is alternately described as a form of resignation and as a prayer. John Donne persuasively argues in *Biathanatos* for a reading of Samson as a suicide. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas rebuke Samsonic suicides as theologically unjustified (Pojman 44). But many scholars and writers have argued that Samson is driven not by a wish to die but by a motive of revenge.

His death is incidental, even accidental. The most persuasive of these voices is John Milton, whose *Samson Agonistes* poses “questions of the distinction between inadvertent self-destruction and suicide” (Radzinowicz 102).

One of the better readings of *Samson Agonistes* proposes that Samson is unwillingly self-killed. Though ignorant of the exact outcome of his actions, he maintains freedom of choice even as he pulls down the temple. The fault of the tragedy lies within Samson; responsibility is not ceded to the Philistines. In marrying Dalila, Samson has betrayed not only God but also himself. Deliverance is a major theme of *Samson Agonistes*, not merely God’s delivery of Samson from slavery by death but Samson’s delivery of himself. During the play, Samson transforms himself from a blind, diseased, and irrational man into a man of mental clarity and inner peace. Jail becomes his “house of Liberty” (949); the power and glory he achieves in his moment of greatest weakness and shame is the last in a series of ironic reversals that Milton employs throughout the play.

Samson knows that in some profound way he has been made into a scapegoat, a sacrifice. The turning point of the play, and the scene most relevant to the Mississippi hangings story, occurs when the Public Officer comes to retrieve Samson to perform at the feast of the Philistine Lords. Samson refuses the summons:

Where outward force constrains, the sentence holds;
But who constrains me to the Temple of Dagon,
Not dragging? The Philistian Lords command.
Commands are not constraints. (1369-72)

The officer, as an instrument of the state’s force, is unaccustomed to such resistance. Samson eloquently declares to the officer that while the Philistine state possesses force, it does not possess authority. Samson later dupes the officer into believing he has changed his mind and is willing to obey the commands of the Philistine state. At their temple, with everyone believing he will entertain, Samson defeats his oppressors with no physical weapons other than his bare hands. With a heroism at once stark and swift, he prevails through divinely inspired strength of will and becomes himself again: “*Samson hath quit himself / Like Samson*” (1709-10).

The Campbell hanging can be understood as an example of an emerging psychology in which the dominant myth is the Samson story. What makes the myth and the Mississippi reality so compatible is that each is open to readings of intentional and unintentional self-killing; nor does the ambiguity of either displace its underlying political implications. Certain of these Mississippi jail hangings have a Samsonic quality about them — where a kamikaze attack on (the architecture of) the enemy comes at the sacrifice of self, where death is not a violation but rather a fulfillment of the Samson code. The image of a body suspended from the ceiling — as if acting in concert with gravity to pull down the structure itself — suggests that the technique may function as a way to “take down” or assault the architectural and institutional structure of jail. If so, then, as with Samson, the individual power of the oppressed and incarcerated not only endures, it may even triumph.

The hanging of David Scott Campbell is the most Samsonic death of the forty-nine, and the unexpected reversal in his actions is quintessentially Miltonic. Like Samson, Campbell was a criminal. His feats of strength consisted mostly of a series of felonious acts. As an African American from rural Mississippi, he was breaking a long-standing taboo on interracial dating by seeing Nikki Griffin, his Dalila (sleeping with the enemy may have been a significant contributing factor to his downfall). Campbell was handcuffed and taken into custody by Griffin's people (here the jailers-as-Philistines theme resonates particularly well because the prisoner was African-American and the state representatives were European-American). Even Campbell's intoxication may be seen as an experience on the order of Samson's blinding, as the idiomatic expression "blind drunk" might suggest. If so, the hour in which Campbell was incarcerated proved to be the hour in which he led himself out of his dark, dungeon-like state. The police found Campbell in darkness, crouching on Shakey Ground. They arrested him, a man who had been a thorn in their side for several years. They brought him under the commandments of their laws. They isolated him. But before they left him, Campbell made a telephone request that insured that a public officer would return for him. Was the need to use the telephone deliberately misleading, an equivocation designed to give Campbell the time to plan an attack upon the fortress of his enemies?

In his hour alone, Campbell no doubt confronted his own state of powerlessness. Through what can be described as either an act of fate or divine intervention, the light of the jailhouse was extinguished. But in that darkness, Campbell's sight seems to have been restored, along with his strength and an understanding of how best he could damage his enemies. When the jailhouse was again illumined, Campbell was discovered hanging. Both representative and performative of pulling or tearing the building down, Campbell's gesture (and the furor it raised) did in fact wound the enemy and its architecture. At least the reputation if not the actual structure of the Neshoba County jail is now in shambles because David Scott Campbell tore down the walls of his enemies and died in the process. The Campbell family filed a \$1.5 million wrongful death lawsuit against the sheriff and the jailer that is still pending in Jackson. Because of the "chorus" of media publicity surrounding Campbell's death, other jails throughout the state have been shut down. At least one is certain to be demolished. On this reading, David Scott Campbell has posthumously emerged as a victorious agent against the injustices of Mississippi.

Incidental self-killing theories suggest active interiority on the part of the dead subjects. They force you to determine what the intentions of the subjects were, pulling you away from motives and categorizations of suicide and exteriorizing antagonistic forces, and focusing the subject's aggression against an abstract "other" represented by the jail. What is most appealing about this theory is the heroism and subjectivity with which it endows the inmates in question, the way it links their actions and motivations to the results that the hangings produced: the closing of uninhabitable spaces, the building of better jails, the scrutinization of Mississippi's entire jail system. Thus the hangings acquire a prophetic function, influencing and redirecting Mississippi history. The revenge that they accomplish implies justice in a story largely marred by repeated accusations of injustice on both sides of the making/unmaking question.

What you call something matters. It confers a particular kind of identity and authority upon the thing named. Whether you call the forty-nine hangings lynchings or suicides will additionally assign sovereignty to particular actors involved in the drama (and not to others). The territory in hot dispute is political and intellectual, but at its core it is solidly somatic: the corpses of forty-nine men and women. To call them suicides is to confer an ipso facto sovereignty on the inmates, assigning them the individual freedom and might to have been directly responsible for their deaths. This assignment of sovereignty is precisely what was so disturbing to many of the inmates' loved ones, because it appeared to obscure or excuse the responsibility of other people and institutions (by intent, neglect, or design) for these deaths, letting them "off the hook." But there is much more to this sovereignty than the exculpation of others or the appropriation of an unsettling taboo power on the part of the inmates. As suicides, the hangings resonate in affirmative, exhilarating, conceptually complex and sublime ways.

KILLING TIME

Could a whole man not author his own death with a thought? Shut down the ventricle like the closing of an eye?

—Cormac McCarthy

There are always suicides among people who are unable to say what they mean.

—John Irving

The Mississippi jail hangings have been classified as suicides by many organizations that have not provided a definition of what suicide is. Emile Durkheim's 1897 definition is a standard starting place, but Durkheim provided a theory of suicide rates, not an explanation of suicide itself. Durkheim's definition does not delineate subcategories of self-inflicted death, such as martyrdom or heroic self-sacrifice, and excludes much of the inner dimensions of agency: intent, motivation, thought, and emotion. Pojman offers a more concise and useful definition of suicide as "an act in which a person intentionally brings about his or her own death in circumstances where others do not coerce that person to act. That is, (1) death is intended by the agent, (2) it is caused by the agent, and (3) no one else is forcing the agent to this killing of self" (42). If the freedom of the individual is severely limited, or if the fear is paralyzing, then the self-destructive act cannot be authentically suicidal. Pojman's definition may also have significant implications if the context or locale of a self-destructive act seriously inhibits personal freedom, such as a jail.

The mean age for all forty-nine inmate deaths was 29.5. Five major studies have reported a mean age between 28 and 29 for jail suicides (Stone, "Means" 50). Every jail death in Mississippi was by hanging, and hanging is considered to be one of the older, more violent methods of suicide. And while there are many ways to commit suicide in jail, Hayes and Rowan report that hangings account for over ninety percent of all jail suicides nationwide. Pris-

oners recognize that jail bars always represent a potential hanging site (Anno 90). Guards and inmates have diametrically opposed semantic interpretations of the word “bar.” For guards, a bar is a barrier to prevent inmate escape, while for suicidal inmates a bar may be a place to fasten and hang themselves, a means of nihilistic escape from *their* side of the bar, thus “crossing the bar” (as in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s famous poem) without actually crossing it.

Suicide is both a validation and an invalidation of life, an expression of crisis and an effort to resolve crisis. It is an invisible institution, an uncivil religion of self-denial and self-affirmation. The rash of jail hangings in Mississippi and the publicity surrounding them have helped reveal this aspect of self-destruction as a normative form of communication. What is being communicated, however, needs further elucidation.

Exhibit Three: Ronald B. Berryhill

Thursday, November 11, 1993. Ronald B. Berryhill, a 43-year-old white male, has been jailed at the Hinds County Detention Center since St. Patrick’s Day. The Batesville man is being held on capital murder and armed robbery charges in the March 12 slaying of Richard Lamonte, 36, a clerk at the Junior Food-Mart Shell Service Station on Springridge Road in Clinton. Though inmates have reported that Berryhill is “acting strangely,” according to Sheriff Malcolm McMillin he has said nothing that would indicate that his behavior is abnormal for a man confined for months. Berryhill has, however, missed dinner Wednesday night and given away several personal items to fellow prisoners that evening.

Ronald Berryhill plans his final hours carefully. He makes his bed. He stores the rest of his gear neatly in a bag on the floor near it. He ties a part of a sheet to the middle of the door of his cell, 310-B. He squats and leans forward and suffocates himself to death. Sheriff McMillin will later point out that Berryhill has even tied the sheet so that he can change his mind any time about proceeding with the hanging. According to Hinds County Coroner Robert Martin, Berryhill’s body shows no sign of a struggle.

Berryhill’s cell is a one-man unit with no contact and only a limited view of the block’s other inmates. Guards look in on prisoners every hour. At 4:15 a.m. Berryhill is found by officers Joe Broadway and Craig Stevens. The body is warm when discovered. Stevens attempts CPR but fails to revive Berryhill. He is pronounced dead on arrival at Mississippi Baptist Medical Center at 5:15 a.m.

Martin rules the death a suicide, making Berryhill the third inmate to hang himself while in McMillin’s custody. The sheriff says he is satisfied with the officers’ performance and routine and has no plans to change jail security. “I can’t see anything we could have done to prevent it. But no matter how many times I say that, the fact remains that he was in my custody. It’s my responsibility. . . . If we had any indication he was suicidal, we could have increased checks or put him in more secure quarters. But we didn’t know.”

If convicted of capital murder, defined as killing during the commission of certain other felonies, Berryhill would have faced life in prison or death by

lethal injection. Armed robbery, with which Berryhill was also charged, carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

PAIN: An Alternative Methodology

Suicides were the aristocrats of death — God's graduate students, acting out their theses to prove how limited were the alternatives He had allowed Himself and his creatures. Their act was, at its best, superb literary criticism.

—Daniel Stern

Psychological and sociological perspectives dominate the contemporary analysis of inmate suicides.⁷ This seems reasonable enough on the face of it given the complementary domains addressed by the two schemes: the inner workings of the self on the one hand, the external pressures of the social environment on the other. Yet both paradigms seem insufficiently attentive to the more making-oriented dimension of the jail hangings, threatening to obscure or preclude altogether the creativity and subjectivity present in those acts. Both also seem to cast the inmates in passive roles, as the objects of forces beneath or beyond the purview of conscious awareness and volition. Clearly, however, a truly comprehensive framework for interpreting the will to die in Mississippi jails should be adaptable enough to venture beyond the reigning paradigms and to explore a number of other salient contexts that suggest themselves, including *philosophical* (new ways of thinking about freedom), *artistic* (volitional craftiness and a contagious creativity), *institutional*, even *nomological* (challenges to the systems and laws of the state). These four categories in particular are not as arbitrary as they might seem, for as it turns out, they remap the conceptual field of inmate suicide in a way that offers distinct advantages over the more traditional dual framework. Specifically, the philosophical, artistic, institutional, and nomological models — which it would not be inappropriate to give the acronym PAIN — form a composite frame of reference that provides greater comprehensivity and at the same time greater refinement than the existing binary approach. Moreover, as will soon be evident, this alternative methodology permits a greatly enhanced sensitivity to the making-oriented aspects of suicide.

Philosophical Hangings: The Open Door

Has it smoked in the chamber? If the smoke is moderate, I will stay; if it is excessive, I go out: for you must remember this and hold it fast, that the door is open.

—Epictetus

Suicides pose a potent challenge to power that is a problem not only for jails and penitentiaries but also for philosophers. Most philosophical discussions of suicide center on the definition of the act and whether or not it is a rational or irrational, moral or immoral modality of thought and behavior. From this per-

spective, the principle questions posed by jail suicides are: if being in jail is the result of coercion and excludes or seriously compromises freedom of choice, then can self-destruction that results from the fear and despair of incarceration be truly considered suicide? Are jail hangings morally acceptable or unacceptable? Jail suicides may indeed be a proof of guilt, but whose? Are they acts of creation or acts of resistance, or possibly both? What are you to make of these assertions of freedom in institutions designed to limit such acts? Are the nihilistic implications of the acts consistent with the penal environments or subversive of them? While the philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that "Human beings are sentinels on earth and may not leave their posts until relieved by another hand" (quoted in Pojman 45), Kant's argument seems inconsistent when you are not the sentinel but the watched, not guard but prisoner.

Suicide is one of the very few open doors in a jail or a prison. In Western cultures, the idea of suicide as a making goes at least as far back as the Stoics, many of whom considered self-inflicted death to be the supreme assertion of human freedom. The Stoics believed that knowledge is inseparable from pain and suffering. Seneca argues that "contempt for one's body is a sure sign of freedom: You can open up the road to freedom with a lancet, and give tranquility at the price of a pinprick" (Rist 130). Such an attitude toward the body is far removed from the ideas of Scarry, for the Stoics would deny that the body is the exclusive or even primary site of human meaning. Yet both would agree that the body is essential to the reading of suicide as either a making or an unmaking. For Stoics, the ability to be a co-worker with fate and to choose the manner of one's own death is the highest kind of freedom (Rist 130). If Stoicism is thus one of the earliest philosophical justifications for Western suicides as acts containing an element of making, we should note as well that its undercurrents run deep in the prison mentality. As with the Stoics, suicidal inmates possess a negative concept of freedom. They view suicide as the final vindication of their freedom, the only genuinely free act remaining for them. They link a negative concept of freedom with "an obsession with the possible means by which freedom can be obtained" (Rist 249). Such views may be grounded in sharp hatred of life itself. Freedom in jail is the state in which you cannot be forced to act. By hanging yourself in jail, you commit your last free act, and you put an end to any and all coerced ones.

In some of the three exhibits, you can see a rather Stoic resignation on the part of jailers and law enforcement officials who regard suicide as a matter for the prisoners to decide for themselves. But Stoicism is also at work behind the actions of the prisoners. In Raymond Berryhill's ritual of death in particular, a curious muffled echo of the *Phaedo* comes to mind. Berryhill's brave and quiet demeanor evokes that of Socrates. In his death the Stoic code of honor was rigorously upheld. He made his bed and packed his things away. He was cautious and considerate enough not to wake his fellow inmates. In the respectful eyes of Sheriff McMillin, Berryhill killed himself with the highest degree of decorum and honor available to him in a jail cell, for he hanged himself in such a manner that he maximized his freedom to choose between living and dying. McMillin too upheld his part of the code by both acknowledging the practical

impossibility of preventing Berryhill's suicide and at the same time accepting full responsibility for his death. This sheriff's verbal dance shows how jail suicides simultaneously contest and support the categories of making and unmaking. Do jail hangings give up their lives because of the world they inhabit or the world they have lost? The answer would probably include a measure of both possibilities. The meaning with which the subjects have endowed their world is lost in the primal tyranny of the jail, which largely if not completely unmakes that world.

Time has long been a topic of metaphysics, and inmates may perceive the philosophical contexts of time as a contributing factor in their unmaking. In jail, an overwhelming emphasis on time — doing it, serving it — has the paradoxical effect of exposing its subjects to the absurd irrelevance of the future and the fatal impact of time on the body: you die. Jail suicide grotesquely exaggerates both “doing time” and undoing it, while the suspensory nature of a jail hanging represents both a prolongation of time and a cessation of it.

Artistic Hangings

Let us begin then by considering hanging as a fine art. A great American critic has stated that art of the highest or finest quality involves three things. First, a reproduction of natural phenomena[,] second, an expression of the thoughts and emotions of the artist, and third, an embodiment of both these features in an external product, like a symphony, a poem, a painting, a building, or a statue. Or a hanging, I would add.

—Charles Duff

Why do most modern scholars and cultural critics dismiss the creative components of suicide, and insist upon interpreting all suicides, in general and in jail, as acts of unmaking exclusively? Albert Camus is the shining exception, a man with the courage and vision to explore the intrinsic creativity of suicide. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes that “suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art” (4). Camus argues that both suicide and art need interior silence to flourish. Jails seem especially well-suited to provide a milieu where such silences can be produced.⁸ What Camus implies here is that suicide itself can in fact be construed as a great work of art, and he convincingly explores the artistry inherent in suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

For centuries, suicide has been acknowledged as a high art form, arguably by the Stoics but without question by the Japanese in *hara-kiri* or *seppuku*. In both Stoic and Japanese cultures, suicide has a different class resonance from that of the Mississippi hangings, for in the former a method of self-immolation by sword is employed primarily by elites. By contrast, hanging yourself has had a lower-class connotation since the eighteenth century (Miller 73). The Mississippi jail hangings do not possess the ritually formalistic and conventional-

ized structure of Japanese suicide. Whatever artistry is present is self-taught, its materials consisting of found or made objects.⁹ The suicides' artistic improvisations would lie within the method of dying, rather than the impulse to die: anyone can wish to die, but to kill yourself in a space designed to keep you alive demands imagination. The stresses and extremities of the jail environment may even awaken a desire for artistic expression inherent in the subject prior to incarceration, a desire to be realized in the medium of self-cancellation. If, as Scarry argues, pain obliterates language, the institutionally focused, perfected pain of jail may obliterate nearly all forms of creative activity, leaving the inmate nothing to "speak" with save the obliteration of self.

Though hanging may clarify reality for the jail artists, it should not be thought of as a form of therapy; for the normative healing function of therapy is moot in the wake of the subject's death. Nor should the jail hangings be thought of as what is often pejoratively called "victim art." In their grotesque recovery of agency, as subjects of their own deaths, the inmates do not capitalize on their victimization but actively reject and speak back to it. Their creativity is revived through their work, but not in a self-promoting or self-aggrandizing fashion.

Jail hangings evade the pressures of compliance and conformity in most ingenious ways,¹⁰ and their evasive, transgressive, and subversive qualities invite interpretation of the acts as art. Art of course can be judged as product and as process. Either inside or outside of aesthetic evaluations, jail hangings meet Duff's somewhat dated criteria for judging art.¹¹ By artificially terminating life, the suicides reproduce the natural phenomena of dying. The texts certainly express the thoughts and emotions of the artists, though they cleverly and frustratingly leave much of the interpretation of these expressions to their immediate and later audiences. But the real tour de force of the hangings, what makes them so beautiful and so terrible, is how fully they embody their art.

Jail suicides *perform* the art of self-negation. A convict who commits suicide out of the depths of despondency is an artist enacting a dream of expressive freedom upon his or her own body. In the complex creativity of these forty-nine men and women, you can see a reenactment of the whole history of human thought and art, a history in which great thinkers took the given, the known, and found in it something new, in an artistic leap of the human mind from known to unknown. They perceived another form of sleep in their bedsheets.¹² They found a new way to wear their old jeans.¹³ They challenged the engineers from Nike in testing the tensile strength of their shoelaces. Their transmogrifying acts are the making of metaphors, their occupied and improvised nooses the bridge from known to unknown. These "signifying" prisoners were driven by necessity to turn need into imagination. They were tricksters, emerging as trickster figures so often do wherever there is an abuse of power, defiling the sacred, taking power from the oppressor. Despite being trapped by the negation of their paradoxical art form, all are symbols of the creative impulse, using their art to alleviate pain, which for Scarry is the crowning purpose, achievement and signature of the human imagination. In this respect they embody a universal truth of art in a beautiful and horrifying aesthetic of need. To see these forty-nine men and women in this way is to recognize the

extent to which they died from openness and courage, suspended and stiffening by their own creative acts, driven to become living/dying tableaux.

No better example exists in which one body can truly be both creator and destroyer than a suicide, especially a jail suicide. The will to be nothing and the absence of will come together in a startlingly profound and performative way — perhaps even a theatrical one, for it may be that all self-violence in jail is designed for the subsequent experience of an audience. This makes it potentially vulnerable since it needs to be witnessed to be validated as art. In large part because of the debate over their authorship and their journalistic depiction as unmakings, the Mississippi jail hangings have not been presented to a public audience as works of art. Once revealed as makings, however, the power of their iconic imagery rises before you. It speaks of stillness, of liminality and resistance. This is more than giving the finger to the establishment, or burning the flag, this is offering a dead body as an installation piece in a disciplinary space designed to be utterly devoid of artistic expression. The subjects have created art that refuses inert responses, that demands analysis and criticism, as well as the affective responses of disbelief, anger, horror, revulsion. They exhibit works that will have to be violated and destroyed, that must be taken down by jailers and forensic specialists to examine and deconstruct. Insofar as they anticipate the violation of their own artifice, they force those who take them down, who tamper and desecrate and critique their art, to appear as barbaric as the bludgeoner of Michelangelo's "Pieta."

Read as artistic texts, these jail hangings play a transformative role once envisioned only for high culture. They may even invoke the religious iconography of the original sacrifice of Christ on the cross.¹⁴ Though their work will never hang in a museum — unless jails become museums or museums become jails — they demand artistic acknowledgement, and upon receiving it they are even more beyond cooptation, emerging as one-of-a-kind masterpieces of individual expression in an age when other works can be endlessly copied, commodified, put on T-shirts and peddled to a mass audience.

Hanging may thus be viewed as the fruit of human ingenuity, an art form that proliferates in the spaces of jails. As creations or makings, hangings reveal something about the uncertain liminal universe of jail. You confront a representation of death whose medium is also death. In this sense, jail hangings are far more radical than snuff films, where there remains uncertainty whether the death depicted is an actual death or merely a cleverly packaged dramatization. Snuff films offer a representation of death in which the medium is only rumored to be death, though the viewer cannot ever know. Jail suicides are productions of radical commitment, inspiring awe, horror, and respect; snuff films, on the other hand, produce radical undecidability and perhaps even a strange aesthetic pleasure accompanying their indeterminacy. Jail suicides make art whose principles are alien to established norms; they are deaths external to society, and at the same time, as you shall see in the following two sections, at the very heart of it.

Institutional Hangings: By Design and Decay

Whensoever any affliction assails me, mee thinks I have the keyes of my prison
in mine owne hand.

—John Donne

Stone describes jails in the United States as “one of the most maligned and forgotten components of the criminal justice system” (“Jail Suicide” 84). Even more vividly than riots, stabbings, and sit-down strikes, penal suicides remove jail from abstract consideration and reinsert human actuality in the picture. They provide direct evidence of the absence of conditions amenable to life. The stressfulness of jail, the chronic, quotidian peril of living in jail or prison, may in itself be a sufficient cause for self-injury.

The first question institutional perspectives can help address is absolutely critical: why did the jail suicide rate in Mississippi suddenly and significantly jump in the mid-1980s? Two strong explanations exist. First, jails and prisons became seriously more overcrowded during this time than during the previous decade. Because of the overcrowding of prisons,¹⁵ Mississippi officials were forced to house state prisoners in county jails, prisoners who lived for months at a time in a state of limbo, uncertain of their status in the state penal system. The second explanation lies within the state’s propensity to jail the mentally ill without charges, a trend which began to accelerate in the late 1970s. Nationally, Mississippi ranks second to another southern state, Kentucky, in the percentage of jails holding mentally ill people either not facing charges or facing trivial ones. According to a national study, an astounding 75.9 percent of jails in Mississippi held such prisoners.¹⁶ The abuse of jails as makeshift prisons and mental hospitals is epidemic primarily because legislators and citizens appear unwilling to fund the expansion of such facilities.

Jails have long been locations of important state activities in Mississippi. Political fire-eater Theodore Bilbo launched his 1915 gubernatorial campaign from an Oxford jail cell, where he was being held for contempt of court. Hundreds of voter-rights demonstrators were arrested and jailed for their political protests in Mississippi during the 1960s. But there does not have to be such an overt presence as these for jails to be scenes of intensely political acts. The most subversive and transgressive acts that have taken place in Mississippi in the last twenty years are the inmate hangings.

According to Copeland, “The need for society to jail certain of its members has evolved with time. Historically, the nature of the incarceration has changed from one of pure punishment to those including rehabilitation with return to society of the offender” (341). But Mississippi has had great difficulty making the transition from penal labor to a less utilitarian view of its prisoners (see Griffiths), and the state has been extremely reluctant to remove an overt punitive element from its correctional facilities. Indeed, in 1994, the state legislature considered a bill to allow caning as a punishment for certain crimes.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault offers one of the best explanations of the social and historical contexts in which modern penal institutions emerged. Foucault argues that incarceration lies at the heart and soul of the

modern state, the crucial site for the totalitarianism of the norm. Breaking the law is always an attack on the sovereignty of the state. A jail cell is inherently isolating, a constant reminder that you are alone, naked before the overwhelming power of the guards. A prisoner is objectified, a case to supervise, examine, manipulate, and coerce.

The peculiar dialectic of the jail lies at the heart of community organization. All jails invert, or turn inside out, the conventionally narrated social symbolism of “insider” and “outsider.” If you are placed “inside” a jail, you are immediately defined in both socio-political and symbolic terms as “outside” your own community. You are, at least temporarily, labeled an alien, an outsider. However, if you are “outside” the jail, you are defined by those same terms as “inside” your community or larger polity. To be locked inside a jail by the boundary rules of law immediately brands you as marginal, illicit, wrongdoing, while simultaneously allowing the public to define itself as good and on the right side of the law by locking itself outside of that marginalizing space.

Often the jail, rather than the courthouse, is the most obvious symbol of the dominant regime in Mississippi towns. The sheriff (or “high sheriff,” as he is often called in blues songs), whose office is often in the same building as the jail, is a more visible symbol of the law than most judges. The association of jails with pain has long been a standard theme in Mississippi blues songs, such as Rubin Lacy’s “Mississippi Jail House Groan”:

Eee laying in my jail now: with my back turned to the wall
And she brought me coffee and she brought me tea
And she brought me everything: now but that lowdown jailhouse key
Mmm: Mmm
I promised not to holler now: now mama now hey hey hey
I looked at my mama: and I hung my head and cried
If my woman kills me now: lord I'll pray to die

The non-verbal expressions of “eee” and “mmm” echo Scarry’s notion of unmaking, in that they signal in their shrieks and groans a destruction not only of language but of articulable psychological content, a prologue to the disintegration of the singer’s world. The recent jail suicides seem to recognize, as Lacy did before them, the central paradox of so many Mississippi jails: though it often lies literally at or near the center of civic life, the centralized space of the jail defines and enacts marginality. At the heart of the law-abiding universe lies a black hole of pain and unmaking that is the jail.

Foucault shows how embedding surveillance into the structure of a house of incarceration is the architectural first step in a process of punitive making that ironically renders prisoners into malleable sites for the application of power. As much about the birth of the prisoner as about the birth of the prison, Foucault’s convincing work describes prison incarceration and disciplinary techniques outside of prisons as purposefully designed to create and mold a real or potential delinquent’s individuality in a socially productive and appropriate way: to produce “docile bodies.” (Re)making in jails and prisons is often unmaking in disguise, wearing the mask of discipline: “Discipline makes indi-

viduals: it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault 170). Foucault views social scientists as auxiliaries to the criminal justice system in that physical or psychological examination of prisoners is another form of assault, an affirmation of masked power. Foucault goes one step further, however, in explaining the rationale for this violence: the life of a criminal must be valued and put to demonstrable use so that a regime can maintain hegemonic power over the masses.

As structural embodiments of the state will, jails represent a will that is crumbling, one that suicides demonstrate to be short on infrastructure, "backbone." Most of Mississippi's jailed inmates live in structures that are falling apart before their very eyes. Jail hangings might be read as a grotesque visual pun on the institutional goal of producing docile bodies. And if jail is indeed, as Foucault claims, a school for crime, then hangings give an especially subversive spin on commencement exercises.

It is important to remember that the purpose of most jails is not to reform but merely to incarcerate. All but one of Mississippi's hangings took place in jails or detention centers, not prisons, and Foucault's ideas have greater relevance in the latter than in the former. Prisons punish, whereas jails only hold. Lacking this punitive modality, jails may become places ripe for dangerous contemplation. So that the softer, less scrutinizing, and less punishing jails become, the higher the rate of suicide will be.

The Justice Department's investigation and critique of Mississippi jails suggests that too little institutional watching — not too much — contributed to the inmate's unmaking. Law enforcement officials today constantly complain about what they cannot see; more efficient panoptical control, they imply, would help prevent inmate suicide. From the perspective of the forty-nine inmates, however, the crucial acts of watching are those that follow hanging rather than those that prevent it. The inmates knew, even desired, that they would be watched. In this way, the jail hangings subvert the whole idea of institutional watching, exploiting it to hang not only themselves but ultimately the state as well. They simultaneously say "why didn't you watch?" and "just watch this!" As acts of flagrant resistance to and contempt for surveillance, they thumb their noses at the technological marvels of open tiers and observation towers, offering physical proof that total panoptical control is little more than an establishment fantasy.

Foucault also stresses that penal institutions strive for an ideal of an interrogation without end. But inmate hangings turn the tables on jails and jail authorities, interrogating the jails without end, asking the authorities, "Why did your prisoners die? How could you have prevented these deaths?" The hangings have caused the same interrogative tools and punitive techniques to be used against the system that the system used against them: the arsenal wielded by an army of technicians, policy wonks, and lawyers. The jail hangings have labeled the jails, not the prisoners, ill, unstable, delinquent and dangerous. As a result, many of the jails and some of the jailers have been disciplined, punished, and reformed. Foucault correctly points out that it is the power of violence rather than the application of law that prisoners respect, and this holds true in the rare instances when power shifts from guards to inmates

(Foucault 266). If the inmates hanged themselves, then their power is “beyond discipline” — a dangerous and potentially self-defeating message coming from a state’s penal institutions.

Nomological Hangings: Martyrdom in Mississippi

I am killing myself to prove my independence and my new terrible freedom.

—Feodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*

According to Lester and Baker, “Many people kill themselves, or attempt to kill themselves[,] partially in response to legal problems. Suicide is common in jails and prisons, often in those who have been incarcerated for relatively minor offenses” (78). The writings of Robert Cover can best establish a nomological context and purpose for the jail hangings. Cover, in an article entitled “Violence and the Word,” offers the devastating observation, “Legal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death” (1601). Legal acts impose violence on others and are built upon “commitments that place bodies on the line,” commitments of and by officials that are realized in the flesh (1605). Cover introduces the topic of the law’s imposition on bodies through a discussion of martyrdom, rebellion, and revolution as violent refusals to accept in a shared physical space the normative future imposed by a dominant power.

Monelli v. Department of Social Services (1978) established that local governments could be sued for violating the rights of police suspects and jail inmates (Winfree 642). This is one way of fighting back at a system as deficient as Mississippi’s, using the oppressors’ law to your advantage by turning it against them. Another method requires taking the law into your own hands and becoming a secular martyr: “Martyrs insist in the face of overwhelming force that if there is to be continuing life, it will be not on the terms of the tyrant’s law. Law is the projection of an imagined future upon reality. Martyrs require that any future they possess will be on the terms of the law to which they are committed” (Cover, “Violence” 1604). Are the jail hangings an example of Mississippi martyrdom, a dramatic reconfiguration of what Cover calls the *nomos*, the normative universe? Construed this way, suicide would become almost an obligatory act, an imaginary triumph in the face of the overwhelming injustice of the state’s jails, literally the creation of a new kind of order.

Because pain and violence are law’s field, even routine legal acts either imply the infliction of pain or are grounded in the potential to inflict it. Cover shows that you cannot separate legal interpretation from punitive violence. From the perspective of a defendant or prisoner, the legal judgment is “an experience of being violently dominated, and it is colored from the beginning by the fear of being violently treated” (Cover, “Violence” 1608). What is it about being arrested and locked up that makes some subjects want to disavow state law for the undeterrable claim to self-violence? If the suicides are rejecting a particular form or understanding of law by means of their suicides, what understanding of law are they offering in its place? Is it that the legal order mobilizes violence and that by suicide a prisoner attempts to mobilize law for dif-

ferent ends? Many of the subjects were not sentenced by Mississippi courts, yet their forcible detention was already part of the field of pain and death in which they would have been judged. Indeed, four of the juvenile inmates who hanged themselves were illegally detained in adult jails, without bond or bail, in direct violation of federal regulations.¹⁷

Undoubtedly, the continuum of legal violence begins well prior to legal conviction. Suicides anticipate being marked by the state's judicial system and defy submission to it. The forty-nine suicides tended to occur early in the tenure of the inmates, suggesting that they immediately and reflexively resisted displaying the attitudes necessary for survival in the hierarchical structures of the penal system. They were unable or unwilling to lose their capacity to think and act autonomously. They were freshly disgruntled and had not yet controlled their inhibitions against violence. While inmate beatings occur with unfortunate frequency, most prisoners are not abused this graphically. And yet merely to be guarded is to be dominated by the law. And to be dominated is to be beaten, defeated.

Because of its civic prominence and cultural centrality, the jail is a core site for "normative mitosis," a concept Cover introduces in his article "Nomos and Narrative." Cover cites several insular American groups such as the Amish and Mennonite communities to demonstrate this idea of normative mitosis, where "a world is turned inside out" by acts of creative resistance to the existing nomological order; "a wall begins to form," delineating an alternative vision of law with an integrity and coherence of its own; but one whose very legitimacy looks different "depending upon which side of the wall our narratives place us on" ("Nomos" 31). Cover points out that the legal order of the United States, and indeed that of most democratic forms of government, is founded upon the consent of individuals to a social contract; acts such as secession are revolutionary responses to a legal order grounded in such principles. In this context, jail hangings can be read as revolutionary normative responses to the legal order, revolutionary ways for the accused to redefine the social contract forced upon them, a contract that in its existing form mobilizes violence against them yet denies them the right to mobilize a similar violence against themselves and to bear personal responsibility for that violence. They are legal acts, where violence is imposed by a judge located not outside but inside the body of the accused. Jail hangings are a form of legal interpretation that expresses a willingness to die for an understanding of a normative future far different from that of the dominant power. They express a longing for, and to a very real degree create, an alternative normative structure and architecture, allowing the inmates to feel at home within the alien space of jail, where they can invoke the reassuring intimacy of "dressing," "sleeping," and "showering," even while grotesquely parodying these activities. On this view, jail hangings are an ultimate display of normative mitosis. Indeed, one might even suggest that the very "cell" of the jail divides, for the ideal unity of prisoner and cell that disciplinary techniques have as their goal is forever broken in two by the physical and metaphysical weight of the inmate's lifeless body. Where physical space under the control of the legal system once circumscribed the corporeal space of its subject, that latter space is now defiantly reclaimed as the autonomous and

arbitrary universe of the individual. Moreover, the subject will physically separate from the cell upon the discovery and removal of the body, a final disturbing division, a rupture and rupture of the old order.

The violence against the government of Mississippi implicitly performed by a jail hanging can be read as a revolt against the violence implicit in the law itself. Thus hangings throw into question who the oppressor is: the subjects themselves? The jailers? The jails? The law? Whatever the answer, jail hangings indicate a strong commitment to live or die by a *nomos* other than that of the state of Mississippi: namely, the dignity, honesty, and sovereignty of a pure form of American individualism. Inmate suicide is a singular act of subversion, both a renunciation and an enunciation of violence. It says to the practitioners of law that you will tolerate no legal acts of pain and violence upon your body other than your own, and it says to the body that you are allowed through self-violence to remove yourself from the threat and imposition of violence by others, to put your body on the line in the articulation and defense of a normative world.

Cover argues persuasively that "legal interpretation is either played out on the field of pain and death or it is something less or more than law" ("Violence" 1606-7). The inmate suicides, however, raise the nagging question of who gets to play Cover's game. Legal jurisdiction does not acknowledge the self-cancelling properties of inmates, yet it can never fully extinguish them either. Even the terminal self-judgments of the jailed are pronounced independent of any state-appointed official or court of law. For the Mississippi sheriffs who had hangings forced upon them, jail suicide is the crisis point at which the relation between state power and the individual subject is threatened with inversion.

Billy Holliday's famous song "Strange Fruit" at once captured and indicted the whole ineluctable racial heritage of the South. With a singular strength of voice and conviction of heart, Holliday sublimely contrasted the vigilantism of lynching and its "strange and bitter crop" to the gallant southern landscape with its lush pastoral scenery. Through the haunting beauty of her singing, Holliday was able to "harvest" black southern lynchings of the 1930s and 1940s for a national audience, reaping jazz genius and political outrage from those barbarous acts. In recent times, Mississippi has produced fresh fruit from new nooses. But these contested jail hangings look more like estranged than strange fruit. The associations and relationships of the forty-nine prisoners to their respective guards, families, audiences, and selves were severed by a single question: whose nooses? Beneath this question lay both a bitter argument over authorship and the inherent complexities of jail suicide itself. Now that these forces of estrangement have been descried with the help of theories of both unmaking and making, it is at last possible to harvest the fruit of these Mississippi jail hangings.

Unlike the anonymous victims of Holliday's song, all forty-nine inmates became subjects of national scrutiny, ending at least temporarily the invisibility of the jailed and the jails of Mississippi. Outside observers examined both, asking, "Whose justice is this?" In 1992 and 1993, when the authorship debate was at its most shrill, few seemed to recognize that answers resided not only

within the forty-nine inmates but within every jail inmate who ever wished to resist, criticize, or speak back to the state, only to discover that he or she had the means literally within his or her grasp. These jail suicides were revolutionary epiphanies, "eurekas" of creative expression which erupted from the inmates in question and exposed jail incarceration to an unsuspecting public as a violent, violating, and yet vulnerable arm of the law.

Through their hanging art, the forty-nine inmates ironically may have been trying to vanquish the very lynching theories that many of their family members have so vocally advocated. This possibility may be most unbearable to those who first raised the authorship issue. Jail suicides force government administrators and the public to acknowledge that while incarceration can remove an undesirable from the privileges, benefits, and responsibilities of society at large, it denies an inventive individual very little in terms of the potential for criticism, subversion, and resistance. What one inmate can make in the solitude of a cell is something no power can easily destroy. The subjectivity of inmates prevails, even when society creates spaces and systems designed to prevent acts of individual expression. All jail suicides can be interpreted as self-authored and somatic writs of *habeas corpus* that, upon being issued, offer a devastating rejection of the fact or conditions of legal restraint: "now that I have rejected your laws, you have my death on your hands, on your watch. Yes, I am unmade, but so too are you." In Mississippi these criticisms probably indicted the deplorable conditions of the jails as well.

In a story full of contingent truths and uncertainties, this much is certain: jail suicides can happen in any jail at any time, and they are always strong reminders that states incarcerate bodies, not wills. Need, necessity, and will sparked the creative acts of Jones, Campbell, and Berryhill. Their creativity and ironic freedom distinguish them from Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, and from all other victims of politically authorized violence. In the midst of what some might call squalor, they defiantly asserted their right to convert their worlds into weapons and to hang freedom from their bodies, thus reinforcing the primacy of their own individual values, systems, laws, and beliefs above those of the state. The hangings punningly pointed out the gravity of jail conditions in Mississippi. The mean conditions of these jails and the indifference of regulators and taxpayers toward the jailed may not have killed the forty-nine prisoners, but they fertilized the plots for an urgent mode of self-expression to prosper.

Yet some observers looked at Mississippi's jails and jail hangings and saw *only* decay. Atrophied perhaps by the security of the outside world, they did not recognize that the decay they saw was need, and need is the ground in which necessity gives birth to the human imagination. Because the jails they inhabited were so rich with need, the imaginations of the forty-nine prisoners yielded metaphors of making, symbols for the eternal searching of the human soul. Thus the prisoners themselves, by converting decay into design, became fruits worthy of praise.

From a holistic point of view, the idea of suicide is both incarcerating and liberating, destructive and creative. The pure potentiality of suicide is necessary and essential to being human and should never be demonized, even in the noble

pursuit of suicide prevention. To distort the raw verve of suicide seems unnecessarily reckless and cruel, a refusal to awaken from the conceit of a body's immortality. The most intimate enemy imaginable is the self; though you may not believe in the universe of suicide, it lurks inside you, an invisible and therefore titanic perception. To accept the existence of suicide is to accept the soul's constant complicity in its own pain, its own unmaking, its own death. Such complicity is a crucial endowment, for, as Scarry teaches, it begins the big bang of what could be, of human making, creativity and imagination. You cannot lay down your sword and shield by the riverside if you do not first recognize them as weapons. And even if you lay down your weapons, will you lay down your blue jeans, your shoelaces and your bedsheets, every impromptu armament of the jailed and estranged? The tools of jail suicide are also inventions, every bit the equal of a metaphor or a poem, and as such they are solutions, both to the problem of inmate pain and to the unmaking of an inmate's world. To see a shoelace, a bedsheet, or a pair of jeans, not for what it is or is thought to be but for what it could be — because you must and must because the necessity of your own pain drives you to making, for pain is need and need imagination.

Notes

1. This and all subsequent exhibits are transcriptions of Jackson *Clarion Ledger* accounts that have been modified for style. Details of content have not been altered.

2. In April of 1989, Raheem Wells, the quarterback of the Kettering High football team in Detroit, was murdered, allegedly by six teens who stole only his Nike shoes. In November of 1989, Johnny Bates, 16, of Houston, was shot and killed by Demetrick Taylor, 17, after Bates refused to relinquish his hightop "Air Jordans." Both incidents are described in the May 14, 1990, issue of *Sports Illustrated*.

3. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus successfully portrays the convergence between making and unmaking in murder. While Meursault destroys the Arab, he simultaneously encounters his own existence as a rational choice-making agent. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus articulates how the physical unmaking of suicide is the groundwork of the making of philosophical reasoning, an argument that, as with murder, creates a convergence between making and unmaking.

4. See NAACP 27 for a Mississippi lynching that defines the historical context of the recent jail hangings story.

5. Such was the case with detention officer Walter Brown on the night of Sunday, May 23, 1993. Brown claimed he monitored cells at the Jackson City Jail by opening cell blocks and shining a flashlight through the bars because walking down the halls was too dangerous an assignment to perform alone. At 5:30 a.m. on Monday, May 24, the body of Timothy Lindsey, 18, was found hanging by a bedsheet.

6. The involvement of the US Armed Forces may imply that the federal government considered these jail hangings acts of war and was attempting to

ascertain whether its enemy was the state of Mississippi, the forty-nine prisoners in question, or perhaps both.

7. For an elucidation of sociological and psychological approaches to the topic of jail suicides, see Danto; Deheer; Guy et al.; Haycock; Hayes, "Darkness"; Hayes, "National Study"; Pounder; and Winfree.

8. Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* how silence in the penitentiary is intended to promote self-awareness and penitence, not prison art or poetry, some of which may be unrepentant and subversive.

9. Bobby Everett, who committed suicide in the Jackson City Jail in January of 1993, was an artist working in another medium prior to discovering the medium of hanging. At least on one occasion, Everett threw feces and urine on jail guards to protest his incarceration. Judging from several descriptions of his erratic behavior inside and outside of jail, it seems highly possible that Everett was a schizophrenic, a mental illness long known for its artistic tendencies.

10. Escape or jailbreak would be another legitimate art form, as acknowledged by the term "escape artists." The 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption* recognizes perfectly the artistry and volitional craftiness necessary for a successful jail or prison escape. Its reading of suicide, however, does not escape melodrama.

11. Duff was speaking of the art produced by an English hangman, though his comparison applies equally well to self-hangings.

12. Berryhill made his bed with the appearance that it was complete, a whole, when in actuality he had not merely short-sheeted his bed but had deprived it entirely of its central meaning of comfort and rest.

13. Umberto Eco discusses in an essay entitled "Lumbar Thought" how wearing blue jeans reduces interior thought by focusing mind and body on the exterior world. Perhaps Campbell conceived of suicide because wearing jeans made him aware of his groin, the source of his undoing. In hanging himself by the armor of his jeans, Campbell directed attention to the very symbol which had brought him in conflict with the local authorities.

14. As *Biathanatos* implies, Christ himself may have committed suicide.

15. For a more detailed discussion of jail and prison overcrowding, see "Mississippi's Parole System: A Revolving Door," *Clarion Ledger*, 23 March 1991, 1A.

16. See "State Second in Nation in Mentally Ill Jailed Without Charges," *Clarion Ledger*, 19 September 1992, 1A.

17. 1988 federal regulations mandate that juveniles (except those charged with serious felonies or those previously certified as adult offenders) cannot be housed within sight or sound of adults and must be supervised by a separate staff. Three Mississippi juveniles died in adult facilities in 1988: Ronald Bogan, 16, in Tunica County; Melvin Ellis, 14, in Warren County; and Tjuana Barney, 14, in Washington County. Ricky Lee Galloway, 16, hanged himself in Pontotoc County in 1992.

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