

Rewiring the Prison: Early Radio as a Carceral Technology

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Federal prisons in the early 20th century used the technology of radio for distinct ends. The prison at Atlanta facilitated a broadcast concert at the local radio station, with an entirely incarcerated band. At Leavenworth, in Kansas, a warden tried to maintain control over his facility by permitting long radio listening hours for prisoners through individual headsets wired into cells rather than in areas where people could gather. Meanwhile, prison educators believed radio to be a powerful tool in their mission to reform their subjects. This moment of indetermination—for both radio and the new Federal Bureau of Prisons—offers insight into the role of media in the practice of incarceration, as well as in the struggle against it.

Keywords: incarceration, prison, radio, media history, abolition, carceral technology

In the early 20th century in the United States, the new medium of radio afforded federal prisons multiple utilities. As officials across the newly forming Bureau of Prisons (BOP) worked to design a standardized, national system of prisons, they drew on available technologies to build, maintain, and give purpose to their facilities. Radio was one of these. For both radio and the federal prison system, the 1920s was a period of explosive growth and innovation. Leading up to and immediately following the BOP's formal consolidation in 1930, the question of how to use the radio was enmeshed with the question of how to use the prison. Different facilities, with their own particular needs, cultures, and limitations, plied radio differently and even to very distinct ends. Puget Sound's MacNeil Island, for example, was still fighting through radio and military bureaucracies to establish a shortwave radio network in Puget Sound to better respond to the event of prisoners' escapes to the mainland in 1934, while U.S. Prison Milan was constructing a radio listening room for its prison school.

Radio's documented utility at the federal prisons at Leavenworth and Atlanta was more complicated and more revealing about a crucial moment in the U.S. criminal punishment system. In the earliest days of commercial broadcast, the Atlanta prison was, for a moment, in the radio business. In Kansas, Leavenworth warden T. B. White used radio to pacify his prisoners and prevent riotous idleness. At the national administrative level, a powerful reformer named Austin H. MacCormick sought to incorporate radio into his ambitious educational programs, with the explicit intention of enlightening incarcerated people into suitably docile prisoner-laborers.

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Date submitted: 2020-01-11

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In this article, I read and interpret archival material, primarily internal documents from the Federal Bureau of Prisons. I mine these records, comprising bureaucratic disputes, contracted deals, petitions, autopsies, notes, and photographs, for impressions of life in two interwar U.S. prisons, and the personal and collective moments of resistance to their austerities. Some of the most abundant caches of these carbon-copied glimpses of human beings struggling to survive imprisonment are those folders devoted to media, and especially to the uncontested, but entirely new medium of the day: broadcast radio. In this moment, radio's potential uses are still in development and the topic of much discussion and imagination. In important ways, the same is true for the BOP itself.

In two sections, I examine two distinct carceral implementations of radio in its early period as an entertainment medium. I have selected these two cases for their richness, their abundant documentation in the archive, their situation in a pivotal moment for both carceral and media histories, and for their complementary incompleteness. Each case reveals a different aspect of the repressive utility of radio specifically, and media more generally, in U.S. prisons. Radio's synchronous reproduction, its novel capacity to carry live voice and music across prison walls, made it a media technology of great importance for prisoners as well as guards, wardens, and prison bureaucrats invested in broadcasting carceral ideology to the free world.

- 1) At Atlanta's "honor farm," imprisoned musicians were dressed in formal attire and boutonnieres, bussed to the city's new radio studio, and broadcast as they played and sang a concert to the airwaves and a small live audience. Public reception celebrated the concert as a triumph of rehabilitation, enlightenment, and the perseverance of the human soul.
- 2) Over the decade that followed, at Kansas's Leavenworth facility, steady unrest and uprisings were partially quelled—according to the warden—by the institution's provision of radio via private headsets with jacks installed in cells. Warden White's idea, recorded in correspondence with his superiors, was that radio programs filled idle time that would otherwise be put to delinquent and, I argue, insurgent activity. He was right: When radio hours were curtailed, a petition signed by more than 1,000 prisoners was submitted, followed by a demonstration and, ultimately, administrative concessions.

In this period, like every other in the American prison's history, there is clear evidence of what we should expect to see: brutal punishment, open racism, especially anti-Blackness, and a strong regime of heteropatriarchal gendered and sexual violence. But just as clear are carceral tendencies often associated with more recent progress in penology: reform and rehabilitation, sympathetic jailers, and well-resourced programs and opportunities for education as personal growth. Next, I will show how the founding engineers of the federal prison system, including reformers, punishment enthusiasts, and lower level wardens and guards, drew on and imagined radio as a key utility in their punitive enterprise.

By insisting that the organization and insurrection at Leavenworth was a legitimate form of political struggle, rather than a mere function of delinquency or criminality, and by recognizing that violent coercion, not administrative beneficence, was the condition of possibility for the Atlanta concert, I am working in the abolitionist tradition. While existing scholarship on radio in prisons largely emphasizes processes such as

rehabilitation and civic participation, I expand these inquiries to reveal how the media of prisons and policing are the products and agents of slavery, anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, political repression, and union busting.

When understood as moments in a historical struggle, these two cases show us how media technologies can be deployed for institutional advantage by prisons, as technologies of disaggregation and assimilation, and how they can be expropriated by the imprisoned for community building, insurgency, and self-organization. At Atlanta, the scene fits into a genealogy descending from the auction block as illuminated by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection* (Hartman, 1997). The body (and its voice) under state control is animated by the desires and supremacist ideology of a white audience and a settler state. Writing about the phonograph's emergence some 30 years before, Alexander G. Weheliye (2005) argues that "when phonographs began to augment and replace live performances and/or musical scores at the end of the nineteenth century, they created a glaring rupture between sound and vision" (p. 29). Radio both closed and maintained a safe distance between performers and audience by separating presence of voice and sound from the dangerous presence of the bodies of the criminalized musicians. By exporting a carefully curated, artificially produced representation of the prison and its subjects, radio produced the image of administrative control and reform that hold modern "carceral commonsense" together (Camp, 2017). And even here, we find subtle moments of resistance to the totality of carceral command.

When wired *into* the prison, radio at Leavenworth was a bargaining tool and a pacification technique for administration, but a source of information and relief for the caged audience. Throughout the 1920s, uprisings and insurgencies were commonplace at Leavenworth. The facility was growing as a site of confinement and a site of coerced industrial production. Overcrowding, illness, and suicide defined life at Leavenworth. To keep a lid on this explosive dynamic, Warden White provided hours of radio programming per day, wired through individual listening units to head off grouped, collective listening. By wiring up the prison for individualized, headphone-based sound, Leavenworth practiced an aural form of what Foucault called "tactical partitioning" and "segmentation," but the concept of panopticism, even if renamed as pansonicism, is inadequate here (Foucault, 1995). What happened at Leavenworth is messier than Foucault's panopticon and his historical carceral ideal, Mettray.

Ultimately, White's superiors took this pacifying tool away from him, precipitating greater unrest and, perhaps coincidentally, his own capture and injury. In the scant documentation of this series of events, we get an obscured glimpse of militant prisoner organization, self-advocacy, and struggle. This affirms what Dan Berger and Toussaint Losier and others have shown: Prisoners have struggled as long as there have been prisons (Berger & Losier, 2018). Carceral history undermines the commonsense idea that the movement against prisons emerged *ex nihilo* in the 1960s. It also suggests the centrality of media and media technology to the ongoing struggle between the carceral state and its captives—which today number well over 2 million persons.

Beneath all the jailers' theory and their practice, we find prisoners at war with prisons. Because the prison's terms and restrictions are so severe, looking for that resistance means training ourselves to read against the oppressor's archive (itself exceedingly vulnerable to exemption, redaction, deletion, and disposal), and seeking out disguised moments of conflict in unlikely places. Certain remarkable exceptions

from the 1960s and 1970s aside, fighting back in prison doesn't always look like fighting. This insight is borrowed from work such as Victoria Law's (2009) *Resistance Behind Bars*, a study of violence against and resistance by women locked up in U.S. prisons. Law puts it powerfully in the book's "Overview" chapter: "Resistance Behind Bars expands herstory, challenging readers to reconceptualize and reframe what is commonly thought of as resistance and emphasizing the voices and actions of the women fighting for change" (p. 17). Writing prison history demands this reconceptualization, or else we lose the prisoners and their struggles behind the depoliticizing myth of absolute institutional domination that already populates the pages of the archive.

Prison Radio, Prisoners' Radio, and Carceral Citizenship

Though studies of radio in prisons in the U.S. are scarce, Heather Anderson, Charlotte Bedford, and Urszula Doliwa have studied and written about carceral radio in several other national contexts. Anderson makes the necessary distinction between "prison radio," the institutionally produced and aired radio programs in prison, and "prisoners' radio," which Anderson situates in a citizens' media framework that draws on the work of Chantal Mouffe and radical democratic theory. Prisoners' radio, argues Anderson (2013), invites imprisoned people into the process of media production, which "is a discursive public sphere activity—a form of active citizenship" (p. 293). Her distinction holds that prisoners' radio, produced and consumed by imprisoned people, their families, and their communities, is a site of active citizenship construction because it engages communities formed and impacted by the violence and separation of incarceration. Prison radio, on the other hand, is produced and disseminated by prison officials and guards (Anderson, 2013).

Taking two historical cases in the U.S., the site of the largest, most violent, and farthest reaching system of incarceration in the history of the world, reveals radically different operations of radio in prisons, and the work of media in prisons in general. In the U.S., neither the prison nor the concept of citizenship is even sensible without a critical understanding of structural anti-Blackness. Frank B. Wilderson III (2003) argues that even "radical social movements, like the Prison Abolition Movement, bound up in the solicitation of hegemony" fall into political programs that are "underwritten by anti-Blackness" (p. 18). Wilderson holds civil society and Black subjectivity in analytic opposition, a relation where "the positionality of the Black subject (whether a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting) gestures toward the disconfiguration of civil society" (p. 26). For Wilderson, the imprisoned subject or "prison-slave," as the subject of the postbellum preservation of slavery written into the 13th amendment of the U.S. Constitution,¹ is inextricable from the "incoherence" and "dereliction" of Blackness.

Following an abolitionist reading that attends to the settler-colonial and genocidal functions of the prison system, I center the production of prison hegemony on the one hand, and radical challenges to what Dylan Rodríguez (2006) calls the "univocal sovereignty of the prison regime" (p. 79) on the other. This struggle in the U.S. necessarily exceeds the ground of citizenship, which is already structurally denied

¹ The 13th Amendment reads, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

prisoners in varying degrees, or else wages battles within civil society's gendered, racialized, and classed boundaries only strategically and temporarily. These ongoing, dynamic processes often pass through or mobilize media technologies, opening paths for abolitionist and materialist histories of carceral media. Attention to media technologies, content, and protocols opens up new insights and new archival sites for prison history, while greater focus on prisons promises to overcome certain gaps in media history. In the latter, I hope that this article follows in the media-historical tradition of Simone Browne's work on surveillance (Browne, 2015).

The Imprisoned Splendor: Radio Waves Outbound From the United States Penitentiary at Atlanta

The United States Penitentiary at Atlanta (Atlanta) was known as the "honor farm." Atlanta was used as a transfer destination for prisoners deemed worthy on good behavior. Part of what that meant specifically was musical training and a growing educational program.

There are no audio recordings of the prison's band or its orchestra, no group photos, no self-written statements or testimonials. But through letters and reports passed from desk to desk in a burgeoning federal prison system, then housed loosely within the Department of Justice and not yet formalized into what would become the Federal Bureau of Prisons in 1930, their existence was recorded. Atlanta was not the only prison to equip its captives with musical instruments and training, as many sparse files of receipts, budget documents, and funding requests show. However, Atlanta's investment in and development of imprisoned musical talent appear to have been the most expansive.

In the fall of 1913, the United States Civil Service Commission put out a job advertisement for "an open competitive examination for orchestra and band leader, for men only . . . at the places mentioned in the list printed hereon" (File 4-1-1-32, Records of the Bureau of Prisons, Group 129 [RG 129], National Archives Building (NACP)).² They hired Professor J. P. Wilhoit to oversee the music program, which held several concerts within the prison under his tenure. Requests for special outings for performances in public were made, but always rejected by Wilhoit's superiors (4-1-1-32). After the replacement of both the Superintendent and the Warden, an outing was finally approved. A 30-piece orchestra of incarcerated men from the Atlanta prison would play a full concert over the fledgling medium of broadcast radio at the city of Atlanta's WSB station on Sunday evening, May 7, 1922.

In the days leading up to the concert, *The Atlanta Journal*, which owned WSB at the time, plugged the event in a front-page article titled "Federal Prison Band Will Give Radio Concert Sunday: Famous Organization to Be First of Kind in Country to Broadcast Music—Prisoners to 'Come to Town'" (4-1-1-59). The article touts the band as famous and unique, and ready to "entertain the world at large" via "*The Journal's* big wireless station." Back on the front page on Monday evening, one day after the concert, *The Journal* boasted, "U.S. Prison Band Concert Over WSB A Big Success." Under a cartoon promoting home ownership for white men, next to an article promising a rise in the profitability of cotton, and above a very

² References to this Record Group (129) will be followed by their file number hereafter. All archival citations are from the same group at the same location (College Park, MD).

different sort of prison headline—"Several Convicts Are Reported Shot in Carolina Mutiny"—*The Journal* gushed about a great success for the new eras of radio and incarceration:

For the space of one hour Sunday evening, between 7 and 8 o'clock, waves of ether radiating from *The Journal's* wireless station (WSB) wafted to remote sections a concert unique in the annals of the radiophone—a concert whose artistic excellence was comparable with its uniqueness. The entertainment was furnished by the band and orchestra of the United States penitentiary, and the appearance of the prisoners at *The Journal* auditorium marked a new epoch in the conduct of penal institutions in America. (4-1-1-59)

The only quote from a prison official in the newspaper stated that "every man was accounted for" postconcert and that each musician had been "as happy as if he had been on a picnic" (4-1-1-59). *The Journal* was especially taken with the conduct and professionalism of the orchestra, going so far as to interpret the meager security detail³ as evidence that the prisoners were successfully released on "the honor system."

The report covered the arrival of 30 incarcerated men, "black and white," on two large buses that rolled into downtown Atlanta. In a subsection titled "A Splendid Concert," the journal even wrote glowingly of the musicians' attire: "The personal appearance of the men—their immaculate white uniforms, each with a red rose in the buttonhole of the blouse—contained no suggestion of a penitentiary" (4-1-1-59). One stipulation of the agreement forbade printing or announcing the names of the incarcerated musicians, who were otherwise referred to only by their prison ID numbers. The closest we get to a name is a mention of "The Jolly Four," who were "the big hit of the evening . . . a quartet of negroes, whose sentences aggregate 125 years in the prison. They sang without piano, and their melody was beautiful" (4-1-1-59). Valued and tallied according to their sentences, the musicians are rendered entirely fungible to the record of their performance, differentiated only in the white/black binary.

The Journal was still covering the concert two days later, with an article by the title of "The 'Imprisoned Splendor'" with nervous quotation marks. The piece brings a strong reformist imagination to the spectacle, and is worth quoting at some length:

Thirty men they were to whom life had brought grim issues and we know not what soul-sorrow, but men assuredly with loves and needs and longings like our own, albeit they dwell apart. Beyond the gleam of lights and welcoming faces, away in the city's dark loomed a wall of stone, a house of iron, loomed and waited while music broke in golden freedom from their hands and lips.

³ One deputy and two guards according to the paper, and two deputies and four guards according to the warden in a letter to his supervisor.

For the first time the United States penitentiary orchestra was playing outside its own confines. Frequently enough visitors had passed inward through many-guarded gates to hear the prison music; but now had come forth the immured themselves, bringing the heavenly gift of harmony. . .

More than an achievement in music, it was a triumph in honor and ideals . . .

Well may Warden Dyche and all who share his views regarding prison policies and purposes be gratified. To have faith in human nature despite its frailties, to believe that light, not darkness, is meant for every man, and to seek in watchful patience paths whence his "imprisoned splendor" may be waked and freed, is not this true wisdom? Is not this the only ultimate justice? (4-1-1-59)

This imagination of the power of incarceration to deliver individual reform and salvation to its subjects neatly joins with similar visions for radio's capacity to transform everything from education, to how we heat houses, to geopolitics. U.S. newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s were full of articles such as, "Millikan Hails Radio as Leading Mankind to Democratic Ideal." In that piece from 1931, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist introduced by President Hoover promised that radio would defeat fascism and Bolshevism (interchangeable, of course) while "[emancipating] the human mind from ignorance and prejudice" (Millikan hails radio as leading mankind to democratic ideal, 1931, p. 1). So radio and prison, both championed as instruments for the white supremacist project of capital "E" Enlightenment, came together easily for Atlanta's experimental prison concert. The newspaper, for its part, lent its own established legitimacy to help expand the hegemony of both of these technologies.

If both the institutional and public sentiments expressed by the existence of the orchestra and evident in the concert's reception seem familiar, it is because they are moments of the same reformist ideology that has dominated prison discourse for more than 200 years. As Angela Davis (2003) writes in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, "If the words 'prison reform' so easily slip from our lips, it is because 'prison' and 'reform' have been inextricably linked since the beginning of the use of imprisonment as the main means of punishing those who violate social norms" (p. 14). With regular and notable exceptions of revanchist, vitriolic racism and "law and order" demagoguery, embodied in more recent history by the likes of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Joe Biden, and Bill and Hillary Clinton, reformist ideology is the foundation of "carceral common sense" (Camp, 2016). In the documentary residue of Atlanta's music program and its successful concert for live and broadcast audiences, that tendency animates a belief in artistic expression to repair the (broken) soul and combines with a mythology of media to give it purpose and ethereal connectivity. Where the rhetoric of law and order sells incarceration as the only protection against the criminals and bad men of the world, reformism and what Naomi Murakawa (2014) calls "liberal racial pity" appeal to a different mode of metaphysical thinking in which humans are necessarily weak and frail and are therefore potential criminals. But some are, according to this position, certainly "weaker" and more prone to criminality than others. Murakawa (2014), in her study of post-World War II racial liberalism, argues that "liberal racial pity mirrored conservative racial contempt" (p. 13), but that both were perfectly anti-Black, leaving the myth of the criminal Black man an unchallenged agreement between them.

It follows that a correctional path for the criminal (Black) subject must be left open to “light,” here through artistic practice and musical performance, and that the (white) audience to this heavenly spectacle might consume and witness its theological justice. Through the miracle of radio, the noncriminalized, middle-class white radio audience might come to know the true beauty that can be produced within the nation’s prisons, behind the veil of visual and bodily disappearance. If Black music, carved into race records and broadcast as the blues, disembodied and sometimes parodied the Black voice for safe, distant consumption by white audiences, the “imprisoned splendor” went even further. What is advertised in *The Journal* is an ethereal and consumable sample of Black social life accompanied by the promise of violent transformations through training and submission to both white supremacist state and vampiric market power.

The hackle-raising mention of a Black incarcerated quartet called The Jolly Four locates this lost scene in the same tradition of those “Innocent Amusements” read by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). Introducing that work, Hartman writes,

I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual. (p. 4)

Here too, we have a scene full of contradictory (white/free) pleasure and (Black/incarcerated) terror, a scene that is only legible in the context of what Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery.”

Prisoners at Atlanta suffered a horrific loss of bodily autonomy, performed under coercion for WSB’s profit-generating enterprise, and were trotted out like show animals in at least one auditorium (but probably more) and over the airwaves for the contemplation and enjoyment of a politely hostile white public targeted for advertising. Beyond the immediate commercial utility of “the imprisoned splendor” for the accumulation of capital by one Atlanta media company, this spectacle and others like it are sites of carceral hegemonic cultural production. The radio’s technologically specific and novel capacity for synchronous mediation merges with a Christian colonial ideology of the dark but permeable soul to conjure an ideal prisoner, safely drawing out the contradiction of the project of rehabilitation: that criminals are an ontological given and that they are capable of being assimilated, resocialized, and decriminalized through punishment. Through isolation, this imaginary posits, criminals can rejoin civil society as noncriminals—this is “the ultimate justice.” With an aura of immediacy denied static and replayable wax engravings, the radio’s ethereality gathers these tangled but distinctly religious, colonial, and proto-social-scientific justifications for incarceration and delivers them, neatly packaged, to the real citizenry of the State of Georgia—the property-owning, white settler patriarchal family.

The unpaid workers in this peculiar mode of cultural production and hegemonic reproduction are the imprisoned themselves. They are captured, sentenced, caged, called up, trained, uniformed, transported, and animated by state coercion to perform their own assimilability—which is presented to them as a privilege and an honor. The scene from Atlanta is an early instance of a form of creative work that runs through the histories of both prison radio and prisoners’ radio, and a host of other media artifacts produced in prisons and (partially) by prisoners for free-world consumption. Unlike Hartman’s scene at the auction

block, these performances are not directly related to price or exchange value, nor do they precede any sort of productive labor. Rather, under this mode of cultural production, the imprisoned entertainment worker labors at reproducing their own double in the figure of the penitent prisoner, the humbled sinner, or the programmable inmate. This is not a given fact of all media production undertaken by incarcerated people. Innumerable radical newspapers, pirate and official radio programs, and zines stand as counterexamples.⁴

And yet the records subtly suggest that prisoners found moments of relief and spontaneous mutual humanization against the dehumanizing austerities of a federal prison in Jim Crow Georgia. Keeping with the cruel bureaucratic irony and the bitter contradictions of *life in prison*, the small fragmentary glimpse of this other micro-history exists in the letter that delivers its death sentence. It began with a funding request. The prison's instruments had been worn, from a decade or more of use, and were in desperate need of repair. Atlanta requested the money adequate to those repairs, about \$3,000. In defense of this request, Austin H. MacCormick, assistant director of the BOP wrote,

I do not know of any expenditure that gives more satisfaction to a greater number of prisoners than anything that provides band or orchestra music and it seems to me that an expenditure is, therefore, justified from the Prisoners' Interest Fund. (4-1-1-32)

MacCormick here is appealing to his superiors' desire to act in the interest of those incarcerated at Atlanta while spending interest earned on the prisoners' own money. But two years and at least one warden later, the delayed answer to this question of dollars and cents is automation:

I have the honor to hereby request authority to expend approximately \$39.00 for the purchase of 65 graphophone records, to be used in connection with radio installation for transmitting music to the dining room during meal time.

This is to replace the orchestra which has heretofore furnished music at these hours, and would respectfully request that this authorization be made payable from the prisoners' welfare fund. (4-1-1-32)

New sound technology and infrastructure replaces the incarcerated band that "heretofore" played during lunch hours, for a fraction of the cost of maintaining trombones and tuning pianos. But what is more striking than this cost-minded decision to implement a cheap replacement for live music is that there *was* live music in the lunchroom, in a Southern prison in the 1920s and 1930s. This disrupts the carceral commonsense narrative of a steady trajectory from public torture to modern incarceration, moving always forward, toward more "humane" conditions and better quality of life for the imprisoned.

⁴ See, for example, Casey Goonan's (2018) work on radical and revolutionary prisoner publications: *Prison News Service—A Bulldozer Publication* (It's All One Struggle at Base). <https://iaosab.com/2018/02/21/prison-news-service-the-marionette/>.

Perhaps more subtly, however, it shows that the relation between the musicians and the prison music program was not purely extractive and exploitative—although it was both of those, too. This simple fact suggests mutual enjoyment of music in the mess hall, an hour a day of spirited survival under conditions unimaginable for those who have never been locked in a cage. It suggests what incarcerated people already know, but those on the outside have trouble imagining: Social life can persist in prisons. Social life under extreme duress. A real possibility for moments of resistance and refusal is introduced through the presence of a band of musicians, playing for their fellow prisoners over a meal, some of whom certainly counted as friends, comrades, and lovers.⁵

Music, radio programs, books, newspapers, letters—media—are always restricted by prison policy and carceral regimes, but rarely are they fully eliminated. The struggle for interpersonal connection, between fellow prisoners and with outsiders, often plays out through struggles over access to media, media technology, and collective engagement with the same.⁶ In such struggles to *live* in what Rodríguez (2006) calls “civil society’s underside” (p. 79), what is cultivated lies outside the realm of citizenship. It is, rather, a dynamic, relational form of community that has to be built and rebuilt constantly, maintained and reimagined inside and across prison walls, against a regime of policies and rules restlessly bent on eviscerating any unsanctioned relations and disaggregating collectivity.

To return to Hartman (1997), we have to “illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle” (p. 4). The incarcerated/enslaved quartet singing to a broadcast audience to line the pockets of early media moguls is precisely the sort of scene that Hartman calls for illuminating. But continuing to follow Hartman, we must also illuminate the life and the struggle of the incarcerated rather than indulge the dehumanizing hopelessness of carceral commonsense. In so doing, this article aspires to excavate pieces of “hope for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles,” also in the form of “instances of insurgency and contestation” and “small acts of resistance” (Hartman, 1997, p. 14). Seeing what appear to be relatively peaceful acts as moments of struggle and insurrection is to recognize the radical imbalance of power that determines everything that happens within and in relation to prisons and the system of repression, colonization, and genocide of which they are the primary aspect. This dialectical determination includes, of course, the archives through which we have access to institutional histories and the violences that constitute them. In reality, the antagonisms between prison and prisoner, guard and captive, colonizing state and its Black, Indigenous, migrant, poor, and queer subjects are quite clear, though full of context-specific contradictions. To recover the struggles of prisoners against prisons, we must also reconsider the historical function of reforms.

⁵ Sex is all over the BOP archives. It is impossible to tell much about it, because consensual gay sex and nonconsensual sexual violence are described in the same vocabulary of “sodomy” and “perversion.” But the archive documents a prolonged and largely failed effort to stem sexual encounters among imprisoned (people documented as) men through cell assignments, surveillance, punishment, and isolation.

⁶ For reflections on contemporary iterations of this fight, please see the brilliant work of imprisoned radical intellectual Stephen Wilson at <https://abolitioniststudy.wordpress.com/>.

In the early 20th century, many visions and implementations of prison reform worked through media techniques and the installation and management of media technologies. At Atlanta, the “honor farm,” music and performance were part of a carceral reward system and a propaganda tool for jailers (and on a larger scale, a tool for the prison’s hegemony). Across the federal system, as it was outside the prison, radio was imagined as a great innovation for mass education. As we will see later, how to use radio in prison management was a point of much discussion at Leavenworth. During the same time, mail and letter protocols were developed, distance learning programs were explored and expanded, and prisoner–warden collaborative newspapers circulated widely.

The increasing reliance on media and media technology in U.S. prisons is evident in the infrastructural projects undertaken during the period. Already in 1922, a mere two years into the era of broadcast radio, a fierce competition for dominance on the airwaves was on between station owners. Like all competitions between capitals, the edge was gained in establishing early territory, producing at the highest volume, and operating with the lowest production costs and the highest profit margins. WSB saw in the incarcerated orchestra a lucrative prospect for content generated by performers who could claim no royalty, demand no pay, and stake no authorship: production without the pesky problem and costs of variable capital. Immediately following the successful broadcast program—which, in hindsight, appears to have been a kind of audition—WSB wrote to Atlanta, requesting permission to wire the prison chapel for radio broadcast, entirely at the radio station’s expense (investment):

Our purpose in making this connection, if it is agreeable to you and the Department of Justice, is to put the Journal in position to at any time broadcast the concerts and entertainments given in the prison chapel by the prison band and orchestra and such other entertainments as in your opinion it would be advantageous to broadcast by radio. (4-1-1-32)

The managing editor who authored the letter then assures the Warden that “the switch,” meaning the on-switch, would be entirely under his control, just as it was in the First Presbyterian Church and the city auditorium, similarly wired for broadcast. The pitch goes on to what the warden might expect to get out of such a deal:

We are confident that if the arrangement suggested in this letter can be made the occasional broadcasting of your program will increase the interest of the public in the prison welfare work. Also we believe that the fact that the programs are being heard by the outside world will stimulate the interest of the prisoners themselves. (4-1-1-32)

This is one of the early modern “public/private” carceral partnerships. The proposal was received warmly by the warden and approved in a letter by his superiors. Similar but distinct questions and exchanges about centralization of the radio system and how exactly that should be built run through the BOP archives.

Radio as Relief and Pacification: Inbound Waves at Leavenworth

Federal prison officials at different levels of the bureau struggled with how to convene their imprisoned radio audience. Should they be together in a shared space, as was the case for the radio-

educational classroom at the U.S. Prison Milan, or isolated in their listening by a cell-based infrastructure of headphone jacks? A 1933 bid by RCA Victor Company to furnish the Hospital for Defective Delinquents in Springfield, Missouri (now known as the United States Medical Center for Federal Prisoners), suggests a perfectly centralized and isolating system (4-30-1-59).

Centralization was also carefully and intentionally designed into the period's largest and most permissive prison radio system, at the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. The archival file for radio from Leavenworth begins with an April 1929 notice of receipt of a request for pamphlets on the possible uses of radio. From a later request for funds to repair the prison's radio system, it is clear that 1929 was the year of its initial installation.

The next document is a January 1931 letter from Warden T. B. White. The letter includes a detailed explanation of the installation and infrastructure of broadcast radio at Leavenworth and the reasoning behind its use for the entertainment of the prisoners. In the professional but defensive tone characteristic of letters traveling up the bureaucratic ladder of the federal prison system, White first addresses the matter of cost. He writes that to build out the prison's radio system, "it was necessary on account of the expense to call upon the inmates for subscriptions. They readily subscribed for the same and I think about \$2100 was raised" (4-2-1-59). On raising the money for the new media infrastructure directly from the people imprisoned at Leavenworth, "it was installed throughout the institution in every cell and dormitory and was so arranged that they could use headsets instead of loud speakers" (4-2-1-59). Regarding what was broadcast through those headsets, White explained that content was "controlled by one of our officers at the central booth and programs [were] given the inmates in accordance with our official authority" (4-2-1-59).

In this letter, White justifies his decision to install radio throughout the dormitories and cells by reporting that he had discovered several personal radio sets, which had been regularly used in the prison's various workplaces and had caused disorder and distraction among the prisoners. He specifically notes that "inmates" were "grouped around" the radios, a situation to which the installation of headphone jacks in the architectural isolation of cells and structured organization of dormitories seems clearly preferable for guards and wardens. Yet even after the installation of the directly commanded and fully centralized radio system, requests for personal radios were made by prisoners who wanted to study radio itself. White again credits his own creativity and promise as a manager of the prison: "All of these I refer to the Education Department for such prisoners to be offered the benefit of attending the Radio Class we have established in our school which, by the way, is a very good one" (4-2-1-59).

Here, White is displaying his gift for managing prisoners' ostensibly unruly desires for entertainment, for contact with the outside, and for gathering as small communities around a media object, not by intensifying punishment or by forbidding radio, but by implementing radio completely within the oversight, command, and control of the prison. By giving prisoners access to a centralized radio system, he was able to maintain his command over the prison environment through setting the terms and conditions of their listening—when they listened, which programs they listened to, and where they listened and with whom. White even had a solution regarding the prisoners who were interested in the mechanical workings and hardware of the radio, which one might speculate would provide a clear advantage for anyone looking

to organize collective actions or escape: holding an official class and channeling aimless tinkering energy into vocational training as part of a larger disciplinary labor regimen.

The compromising and liberal warden goes on to offer his more philosophical reflection on the use of radio in a federal prison:

Instead of the inmate having to nurse his hands and think over his troubles during this time . . . he could occupy himself more profitably by listening to the good musical programs that are carried over the radio now. . . .

A man's character is looked into best by just what he is doing during his idle hours and I should think that the latter course is much better from a standpoint of building a prisoner's character up than the former. As a matter of fact, as I told you personally, I want to keep them busy at something profitable during their entire time here. (4-2-1-59)

Warden White is describing a secular adaptation of what Weber (2005) called "the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling," but instead of being scored as "evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith" (p. 116), it is evident proof of orderliness and personal behavioral reform—or at least keeping them too busy with work and entertainment to do anything else. The use of "profitable" as a measure of value and efficiency for individual reform and personal improvement further signals the transformation of the old equally moral (though distinct) aspirations of the Puritan and Quaker jailers into a more economic and sociological project. Rather than restoring subjects' relationship with God, the task is to repair prisoners' relationship with society and the social order through programs, trainings, and mass media. Despite this new pseudosociological diagnosis of criminality as a structural social ill, the solution is still a program of individual punishment, reform, and conditioning. White's thinking here is representative of the dominant reformist tendency of his day, while it is also an inheritance from the "civilizing" violence of settler colonialism.

The technique of forcibly putting the poor idle to work and busying the wayward lumpen classes has been a cornerstone of incarceration since its founding. From the settler colonialist Quakers' in/famous 17th-century prison model, often credited as the historic break with spectacular forms of European corporal and capital punishment (such as the one recounted in the opening of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*), imprisonment increasingly becomes a matter of behavioral management through spatial, architectural, and spiritual regimes, the latter incrementally growing into more secular and social-scientific justifications (Davis, 2003; Hirsch, 1992; Meranze, 1996). As Joy James (1996) has shown, however, routine violent attacks on and dismemberment of actually existing racialized (especially Black) and gendered bodies never give way to Foucault's softer mode of power in the U.S. Media techniques, technologies, and protocols have long been indispensable features of these carceral projects. An adaptation of the same regimes that bring surplus populations into prisons manages and dominates time and energy inside. As warden, White leaned heavily on radio entertainment to combat the danger of idleness.

Radio was also used for ideological conditioning. In the June 1930 issue of the *New Era*, an article titled "U.S.P. Radio" provides a history and account of Leavenworth's radio system. The article reveals that the radio was installed in 1929, with prisoners' money and labor, while "officials co-operated in every way possible" (4-2-

1-59). Equipment for the radio system included 4,000 jacks and headphone sets through which transmissions from “both coasts and Mexico City” had been heard during the (nonworking) hours of “noon to 1 p.m. and 5 to 11 p.m.,” with special listening times established for night-shift workers.

Though enjoyed by prisoners, radio’s utility as an entertainment medium was also part of Warden White’s administrative strategy for control. On January 27, 1931, White wrote in defense of his radio system to his higher-ups:

I want to again assure you that I am using the radio as well as the other conveniences and privileges we have for the inmates as a leverage to get strict obedience to our rules as well as an honest day’s work and I believe at this time we are getting much better than it ever was in the history of the institution. (4-2-1-59)

To this assurance, White’s superior replied with some concern about the program selection, which had been reportedly handled by a “trusty”—meaning a prisoner who had the trust of the prison staff: “If the radio is to be made a constructive feature it must, as I have previously said, not be allowed to deteriorate into a mere entertainment of not too elevating nature” (4-2-1-59). After this, White explains that he came to extend listening hours beyond the initial 9:30 p.m. cutoff to allow prisoners to hear the popular minstrel program *Amos 'n' Andy*, and then to include a later program that he personally wanted the prisoners to hear. In his ongoing and anxious attempt to keep control over his permissive radio regimen, White names Austin H. MacCormick as a witness to the increased docility of his subjects:

Mr. MacCormick was in the Cell Houses after night while he was here and stated to me that it was quieter in the Cell Houses than it formerly was before we had the Radio. He had an occasion to inspect the Cell Houses before we had the Radio and after we got it in he stated that it was very noticeable the difference in the discipline in the men and how quiet the cell house was upon inspection recently after we had the Radio going. (4-2-1-59)

Entertainment is, by traditional rule, a frivolous privilege whose denial is locked into the soul of the prison. The simple but powerful belief that prison should be, to whatever extent, a miserable experience is reproduced through ideologies of retribution and deterrence. The slightly more nuanced position that the experience of being in prison should be miserable relative to the lowest conditions of the unincarcerated poor—an implicit law of punishment observed and critiqued during the same period by Marxists Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer—appears uncritically in departmental dialogues about the appropriateness of radio-as-entertainment (Rusche & Kirchheimer, 2009).

White’s name-check of MacCormick is also significant. MacCormick (1931) was the assistant director of the BOP and the author of the canonical work *The Education of Adult Prisoners*, and he would later be the founding director of the archetypal carceral nonprofit The Osborne Society, whose namesake was a close mentor of MacCormick’s. MacCormick was deeply involved in supporting the educational programs at all federal prisons, with special investment in Atlanta. In *The Education of Adult Prisoners*, MacCormick puts forward a reformist but relatively radical vision for prison administration through carefully curated social and media environments. There, he argues that

the whole program of the prison should be educational, taking the term in its broadest sense. It is the main weakness of our American prisons that it is not so. . . . Discipline should be education; instead it is little more than an application to adults of the theory of spanking . . . the larger part of moral education must always be given indirectly. (MacCormick, 1931, p. 7)

As MacCormick worked to shift the thinking of administrators and officials in U.S. prisons at the top, White was putting this disciplinary philosophy into practice at Leavenworth.

This is not to say that White's and MacCormick's permissive social experimentations were able to overcome the violence of the prison to achieve peace and tranquility. During the 1920s and 1930s, Leavenworth was the site of numerous uprisings, taking the form of riots, escapes, and strikes. Suicides were frequent, enabled by access to walkways several stories over a concrete floor. In 1919, one week in June saw 18 escapes (Gilbert, 1919). On August 2, 1929—the year that White implemented entertainment radio with his hope of maintaining order through sensory and mental occupation—*The New York Times* printed an article headlined "3,700 Convicts Riot at Leavenworth; One Dead, Many Hurt." The article pinpoints the eruption at the mess hall, where prisoners complained of inedible and inadequate provisions. Demonstrating the same impulse to deal with his own facility evident in the exchanges cited earlier, "Thomas B. White, the warden, was handling the situation alone. However, he called all relief guards to the prison," where they lined up riot guns and fired on the crowd (3700 Convicts, 1929, p. 1). That same issue includes an article of fewer than 200 words reporting that Leavenworth's had been the third prison riot in two weeks, after similarly deadly uprisings failed at Clinton and Auburn in New York State. In an earlier incident, in 1927, Warden White was also forced into the unenviable task of detailing for his superiors the discovery of a stash of nitroglycerin, firearms, and ammunition that had been hidden by incarcerated workers beneath one of the prison's worksites. It would be fair to say that White's control of Leavenworth was tenuous. This can be explained partially by the rapid growth in and changes to both the federal prison system as a whole and Leavenworth in particular. Over the 1920s, Leavenworth dramatically expanded its capacity as a prison and as a site of industrial production, while the number of people received by federal prisons exploded, from 2,003 in 1923 to 9,800 in 1930 (Cahalan, 1986).

In a telling event in 1931, the radio not only failed to quell discontent, but also was itself the center of a facility-wide dispute. With the formal consolidation of the BOP came increased oversight and a push for nationwide standardization of practices and policies in federal prisons. This played out in a monthslong series of letters between White and the director of the BOP. Finally, White opened up to his superior, who had suggested cutting radio time down to an hour and a half, or two at the most:

I can't see, for the life of me, that we are giving them anything more than they are justly entitled to, and we are occupying their minds in a very good way during our idle hours in the cells. If they are allowed the radio two hours of the many hours that they have in their cells, what are they going to do with the other time that they have in their cells, except brood over their troubles and connive to carry out unlawful schemes suggested among themselves. (4-2-1-59)

The shift in White's tone reveals a warden who distinctly fears his subjects. At this moment of policy standardizations and reformist exploration, and development of radio as an educational tool by academics

and administrators such as Austin H. MacCormick, the head warden on the ground at an overcrowded, rowdy federal prison/work camp plainly views the radio privileges he "permits" as a peace offering, a necessary concession in the face of "conniving." What a fearful warden rightly (from his position in the struggle) views as conniving, scheming, and brooding, prisoners and their comrades might see as political education, development of class consciousness, and radical organizing. But the archive excludes prisoners' self-theorization. That White even sees his soft position on radio listening as adequate to the prisoners' "entitlement" suggests a struggle for access to radio that the incarcerated radio listeners have already won.

It is hard to imagine that White would have felt anything but dismay and distress to read in the director's reply to his personally vulnerable plea for radio policy autonomy:

And so, when in the second paragraph of your letter you say that you can't see that in the unlimited use of the radio you are giving prisoners anything more than they are justly entitled to, the man on the outside sees red and responds by saying that men who have broken the law and damaged their fellow men are entitled to nothing. I can't see that the situation is materially altered by the fact that the inmates paid for the radio installation. They might be very glad to pay their car fare home but it doesn't follow that we could let them go. Their enforced sojourn in an institution brings with it many deprivations which the public has learned to expect as part of the prison experience. (4-2-1-59)

The letter draws on the outside pressure of two imagined groups of people: the red-seeing punishment enthusiast who cannot suffer the notion of prisoners listening to radio, and the "progressively minded people on the outside to whom it is a considerable struggle to keep within the law" (4-2-1-59). The latter group is imagined to feel good about "criminals" sitting around all day and peacefully taking in their favorite radio programs.

White dutifully obeyed his boss's orders and dramatically reduced access to the radio to two hours per day. By August 18 of that year (1931), the prisoners' discontent with the new restrictions had come together in a petition, signed by more than 1,200 people. The demand was communicated clearly and succinctly atop the document: "We the undersigned respectfully petition that the Radio run while we are in the Cell Houses during the day and in the evening until 11 o'clock as it previously did" (4-2-1-59). White was commended for allowing the petition to circulate and assured his supervisor that the men "had probably already forgotten the matter" (4-2-1-59). The director, after three weeks, held his position firmly and articulated it with an explicit and almost philosophical transparency hitherto absent from the two men's correspondence:

The whole purpose of recreation, however, would be defeated if it became apparent that the man in prison received more privileges along this line than the average working man on the outside. All must realize that there are from time to time various attacks on prisons directed against what has been referred to as a modern movement to improve prison conditions, and if we go too far in the bestowal of privileges we are simply playing into the hands of these critics. We believe that we can justify the radio in prisons only if it is properly controlled and limited in its application. If it is allowed to take the place of hard

work, education, or constructive reading, then it assumes the character of idleness rather than helpful recreation. (4-2-1-59)

Here is the obverse of White's perhaps desperate attempts to occupy prisoners' time with entertainment. The director similarly loathes idleness, but from his removed, bureaucratic position, he locates idleness more in the qualities of certain activities against others, in an evaluative hierarchy with hard work at the top. White, on the other hand, has a more concrete *fear* of idleness, imagined and undoubtedly personally experienced as downtime, combined with malcontent and resulting in the sort of insurgency that a Leavenworth warden saw with some regularity. The director's perspective also includes public opinion, or an imagination of one, that he appears to have seen as a kind of battleground (a struggle for hegemony) where permissiveness would be perceived as weakness, emboldening an already-encroaching nuisance that he names as "modern movement to improve prison conditions." To keep that movement in its place and to appease the red-seeing, outraged "average man," the director recites that familiar canonical axiom of penological doctrine: that prison conditions must always be worse than the lowest conditions in the free world.

In the end, even MacCormick backed the two-hour limit in the face of the prisoners' petition, advising in a memo that White tell the prisoners "that we feel the present period of two hours a day to be sufficiently liberal" (4-2-1-59). MacCormick further encouraged White to communicate to the prisoners the risk that if "public opinion is stirred against [radio policy] so strongly," it would result in a "sharp curtailment of the recreation privileges now enjoyed by prisoners throughout the country" (4-2-1-59). Perhaps out of genuine concern for his own controversial reform projects coming under departmental scrutiny, perhaps as an ill-formed and cheap attempt at appealing to prisoners' sense of solidarity, this statement affirms MacCormick's priorities: individual reform, conditioning, and "social education" over conditions and prisoners' own wants. MacCormick, the liberal reformer, and the director share the view that aimless, idle pleasures are to be limited or even stamped out and replaced with productive activity and preparation for the (1930s) labor market.

Again, White followed orders. And again, prisoners fought back. A Western Union telegram went out on October 8 from Leavenworth prison, signed by White:

THERE WAS SOMEWHAT OF A DEMONSTRATION LAST NIGHT BETWEEN NINE THIRTY AND MIDNIGHT IN ALL THE CELL HOUSES DUE TO THE REDUCTION IN THE RADIO PROGRAM FROM SEVEN THIRTY TO NINE THIRTY INSTEAD OF EIGHT TO TEN STOP I HAVE HAD INQUIRIES FROM NEWSPAPERS AND HAVE GIVEN THEM AN ACCOUNT OF IT I DON'T THINK HOWEVER THERE IS ANY CAUSE FOR ALARM STOP SITUATION OK SO FAR TODAY WILL KEEP YOU ADVISED AS TO DEVELOPMENTS= T B WHITE. (4-2-1-59)

In a less panicked dispatch, White reported several days later that he had the situation firmly in hand. He had managed this by agreeing with the riotous prisoners to provide radio access between 8:00 and 10:15, exceeding the prescribed two-hour limit to include the most popular program, *Amos 'n' Andy*.

Although White apparently struck a peace over the radio grievances of his volatile prison population, he most certainly did not achieve any real control over his facility. The end of his time as warden

at Leavenworth could hardly have gone worse for White. Two months after the radio riots, on December 11, 1931, a group of men who would come to be known as the Leavenworth Seven launched an escape with firearms and prisoners of their own, whom they used as shields against fire from the guards who had to watch them walk out the front gate. One of these hostages was Warden White, who was shot somewhere along the way of an escape that claimed several lives and interrupted a local schoolhouse's lessons for the day. White survived but surrendered his post shortly after the incident ("Convicts Kidnap Warden," 1931).

Conclusion

Radio and the prison are two technologies that have defined American modernity. It should be unsurprising to find that, in a (trans)formative period for each, they became entangled to the point where radio actually helped shape and define not just the operation of federal prisons, but their function and purpose. In a moment of extractive domination, Atlanta's WSB and its captive unpaid and temporary workers produced not just a concert, but also an image of the carceral project as holy, transcendent individual rehabilitation. At Leavenworth, radio provided a sorely lacking pastime to the prisoners that (Warden White argued) helped fend off, delay, and dampen insurrectionary energies in the prison. MacCormick, who would later become a colossal figure in the world of carceral reform, sought to reengineer imprisoned subjects for moral, productive, and docile lives before and after release.

The philosophical and material investment in media technologies with the power to do the prison's work—however one conceives of that work—is an old, constantly expanding practice. Today, with companies such as GTL and Securus selling phone calls, tablets, email, audiobooks, family visits, movies, and TV, it has become a multi-billion-dollar industry. With careful attention to what media companies and jailers write and say about these technologies, alongside study of how they fund, cancel, and implement them, we can better understand the historically dynamic practice of caging and disposing of human beings, and the institutional organization that guides that genocidal practice. Then we continue the work that incarcerated abolitionist Stephen Wilson calls "dis-organizing the prison" (Wilson, 2019).

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