Deciphering and Detoxifying Torturing Societies and Torturable Populations: Towards an Inhibitive Manifesto

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Abstract: Torture remains a prevalent feature of contemporary societies. This is an enduring puzzle that demands our attention and calls for a rethink. To effectively counter torture we need to go back to its conditions of production and examine what drives and sustains it. In this essay I lay down some markers to reanimate conceptual, methodological, and political projects against torture. I unpack the notion of torturable populations understood as groups of people rendered torturable by structures and dynamics rooted in hierarchies of worth; and the notion of torturing societies understood as societies over-committed to naturalized ideas of punishment, and the propagation of inequalities through exclusive visions of freedom and negative versions of justice. I suggest that instead of focusing singularly on torture, anti-torture professionals and activists would be well served by looking more closely at punishment and lived experiences of justice. And I ask whether inhibition might present a more potent entry point for anti-torture work than prohibition and prevention. Inhibitive practices would aim to disable the desire, ability, and perceived necessity to torture and thereby transform its productive and sustaining conditions. Finally, I propose the practices of 'holding' and 'wilding' as novel ways of giving substance to an inhibitive anti-torture manifesto.

Introduction

Despite the best efforts of anti-torture activists and rights-based reformers over at least the last five decades,[2] torture remains a prevalent feature of contemporary societies. This is an enduring puzzle that demands our attention and calls for a rethink. My hope is that this article might propel forward conceptual, methodological, and political projects against torture. It began as a keynote presentation at the start of a workshop called *Torture and Society*. I retain the essayistic, semi-personal style that the original format invited and hope the reader will indulge me in this.

For the last two decades, I have been conducting ethnographic research on prisons, prison reform, and the nature of human suffering at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture. DIGNITY is a hybrid, transdisciplinary institute featuring a clinic for traumatized refugees and enabling a range of collaborative programs aimed at supporting survivors of torture and preventing torture globally. In what follows, I reflect on my own research journey and on questions pertaining to the torture-society problematic with a view to infusing the struggle against torture with new vitality. The essay is divided into five parts. Part one is about people and ideas that have moved or are moving me in my quest to understand and hereby more effectively hinder torture. Part two is about definitions and boundaries I think might be usefully transgressed. In parts three and four, I unpack the concepts of *torturable populations* and *torturing societies*. And in part five, I think tentatively about whether punishment and inhibition might be better points

of departure than torture and prevention if we are interested in practicing freedom and promoting justice. Additionally, I introduce the twin practices of *holding* and *wilding* as potentially innovative means through which we might organize for transformation. Parts two, three, and four are about deciphering (making sense of and interpreting), and part five is about detoxification — that is, cleaning up, informing change, and breaking addictive (naturalized) patterns.

The essay can be read as a kind of *inhibitive manifesto*, understood as a statement of intent, a call to renewed action, or a way forward. I try to think beyond articulating a problem, better diagnosing a situation, or generating new understandings in order to grasp what we might do (and think) differently. To be frank, I have often felt this to be beyond my remit — even while positioning myself as an activist–scholar or, at a minimum, as an ally of activists — so this piece should be understood as somewhat explorative, hopefully breaking some new ground, and pointing in some new directions.

"Write not the idea but the effect it produces" said the late US poet John Ashbery (quoted in Alsadir 2022, 316). This seems to be a powerful guide to writing a manifesto: convey the desired effect, not the idea. But how to convey an effect except through poetry? How to evoke a way of life except by living it? For it is new ways of living that I will suggest are ultimately necessary if torturing societies and torturable populations are to become a thing of the past. Following Danielle Celermajer, I propose that to effectively counter torture — however we define it — we need to go back to its conditions of production, to what drives and sustains it, and to what allows it and makes it happen. This requires a conception of torture that is not reductionist, individualistic, and dispositional but instead structural, productive, relational, societal, and institutional. This is about pursuing an ecological approach to thinking through and against torture. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me begin with my own journey into this field and some perhaps unlikely sources of inspiration.

Sources of Inspiration

I typically introduce myself professionally as a prison ethnographer. Somewhat ironically, I developed an interest in prison ethnography from a friend named John, a former bank robber. At the time, he did not know it and neither did I. We met when I was doing an internship in a UK social work department. He had just come out of a therapeutic prison and represented something of a success story. After 25 years of committing robberies, perpetrating harm, and serving substantial amounts of time in prisons, he had found a job working with young people in conflict with the law. We became friends, and a year later, he recommended me to the psychology department of his most recent prison for an internship. We shared a house as I worked in "his" prison. Every day, I went to work naïve and curious, sitting in on intense group therapy sessions and participating in meetings with people serving lengthy sentences for hardcore offenses; every day, I went home and heard his side of the story of life in that specific prison. This was a radical and formative introduction to the idea of understanding institutional life (and criminalized violence) from the inside. At the same time, sharing a house and becoming friends with him was exposing me to sides of the (under)world I knew little about and blurring boundaries that until that point in my life had been relatively fixed.

Another significant influence has been Torhile, a Nigerian prison officer (now retired) whose home in the staff barracks in northern Nigeria I shared for a while during fieldwork for my PhD.

As I got to know him and as I learned more about what it means to be a prison officer in Nigeria, I discovered, that during the 1980s, he was the assistant to the hangman, responsible for making sure the apparatus was correctly set up, that the rope was the correct length, and that the condemned men were properly dead. Sharing his quarters gave me access to the prison training school, the officers' club, and the prison across the street as well as a prison in the southeast of the country to which he was later transferred after a scandal in which he was implicated. Learning about his life and career got me pondering the classic social psychological questions about the "ordinariness" of perpetrators and the banality of evil, reinforcing my lack of belief in the bad apples theory of institutional violence.

A third influence is Danielle Celermajer, an Australian social scientist who would have liked to call her book on torture prevention *Poisoned Orchards*, which also pushes back with conviction against the bad apples theory. Celermajer is a passionate activist scholar committed to justice for the planet (plants and animals included) and, in her book, makes a persuasive case for a holistic, ecological approach to torture prevention that refuses the tendency to simply see torture as a rule violation. She also knows from bitter experience how dilemma-filled and costly it can be to actively and deliberately engage with perpetrative institutions in the pursuit of transformed institutional practice.

Finally, of late, I have been deeply influenced by the writings of Maggie Nelson, who is perhaps best known for her book *The Argonauts*. She is a US writer who, by most accounts, defies classification. Her book *On Freedom* — but also her other genre-transgressing books that mix family tragedies, poetry, court transcripts, and more — has helped me think through the entanglements of our common existence, the difficult task of escaping binaries, as well as reminding me that joyful exuberance is legitimate. This is highly necessary for scholars of tragedy and misery.

These are some of my key influences, some going back 30 years, some only three. Of course, there are many more influences on my academic career and my way of thinking — some sought after, some serendipitous. However, I have carefully selected these ones to illustrate a diversity of sources and to hint at why my thinking about torture and society goes in the direction it does. Notwithstanding the obvious differences — two professors, a prison officer, and an ex-prisoner, what they have in common is a grounding in real-world praxis and a kind of counter-normative transgressive orientation, be it to theoretical orthodoxy or social and societal norms.

Transgressing orthodoxies, expanding definitions of harm

My research over the past couple of decades has been about prisons in transitional contexts — in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Tunisia, the Philippines, and Myanmar — often with a focus on perpetrators and always on perspectives from within and below. I have also always had an eye on penal practice, dynamics of change and practices of reform, and on the importance of reflexive critiques that acknowledge our own complicity in the world's ills. With others, I have been thinking with and through innovative concepts like *prison climate*, *institutional agency*, and *compromised circumstances* (Martin et al. 2014, Jefferson and Gaborit 2015, Jefferson and Jalloh 2018, Jefferson 2022). This is relevant because it points towards what I am struggling to articulate in this essay; the seeds of current and always provisional thinking are found in these past explorations.

Given that I work at the Danish Institute Against Torture, I sometimes ask (or imagine others asking): where is torture exactly in this research on prisons and prison reform? The answer, I think, is that it is mostly implicit. It was most explicit in a project I was part of with another of my mentors, torture scholar Darius Rejali, on the time, technique, and locations of particular forms of torture in Iraq (which I return to below). Torture has become mainstream — in our TV shows, in post-9/11 security discourse, and in our livestreams of war, violence, and destruction. The word "torture" is used in a range of ways from the trivial through the banal to the spectacular. Its use is changing even as its most common legal definition (as expressed in the Convention Against Torture (CAT) of 1984) has acquired significant authorizing power.[3]

Is torture a singular issue or a practice on a spectrum with other types of violence? This question has been present in my own work since at least 2016[4] — and, according to Kelly (2011, 8), it goes back to the eighteenth century. It is gaining increasing traction not least through the Special Rapporteur on Torture's reflections on intimate partner violence as torture[5] and Victoria Canning's book *Torture and Torturous Violence* (2023). Outside the narrow world of law and courts, it matters less what we call things (on paper) and more what things are called and how they are experienced (in ordinary language and practice).[6] I am therefore keen to look beyond the CAT to plural and diverse sources of authority around what torture might or might not be. I am also keen to move from dispositional accounts of torture's origins — in the crazed mind of the psychotic interrogator — to accounts that focus on how people are rendered torturable.

Historically, the definition of torture was never entirely fixed. Rejali notes how the CAT actually broadened the understanding of torture compared to those in play in earlier times. For the Greeks and Romans, it was about "eliciting the truth" through the application of pain. This understanding could also be found in the seventeenth century, but by the twentieth century, the confessional element of torture was surpassed by the drive for information that might not have anything to do with the victim's own acts, and the United Nations Declaration Against Torture (1975) expanded the definition to include intimidation (Rejali 2007, 36). Common to these definitions is the infliction of pain and the experience of suffering. But, states Rejali (2007, 37), "Modern experience has led us to wonder whether even this more comprehensive view is adequate to capture how states organize torture today." It is this question that compels me to try to think beyond the United Nations (UN) definition, which, at least within the shorter span of the last three to five decades and within the human rights community, has become a standard point of departure for much anti-torture work. Rejali flags the outsourcing of torture to third parties (non-state actors) as one reason why the UN definition was being strained and stretched. Today, our contemporary experience is pushing these boundaries even further with the Me Too movement and the threats and opportunities involved with technological innovation arguably accelerating this development in significant ways. A systematic review of this expansion is beyond the scope of this essay. What I offer instead are some examples of new(ish) ways of thinking that diversify and pluralize contemporary orthodoxies.

As Ergün Cakal has argued, debates are ongoing among legally- and medically-minded scholars about how best to define torture, including the much rehearsed issue of the utility of distinguishing psychological torture from physical torture:

> Variably referred to as "non-physical torture," "white torture," "invisible torture," "clean torture," "evidence-free torture," "hands-off torture," "mental torture," "stealth torture," and "torture-lite," the concept of psychological torture has aimed to chart forms of state violence difficult to document due to their propensity to not leave visible marks on victims. (Cakal 2021, 5)

Looking in another direction, Brigitte Dragsted (2021), in an explorative report drafted for DIG-NITY to guide whether we should expand our mandate, notes that "the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture's recent report on domestic violence has authoritatively articulated the positive responsibility placed on states by the UN Convention Against Torture to protect their citizens also against forms of violence perpetrated by private actors, within families" (see note 4).

Anthropologists, political scientists, and zemiologists (scholars of social harm) are also weighing in on such debates.[7] In *This Side of Silence*, Toby Kelly (2011, 7) examines five ways of understanding torture: the ethical, political, therapeutic, sentimental, and legal. He chooses to focus on the legal side, acknowledging that it has become the dominant forum for debating torture's meaning — though recognizing its sometimes contradictory effects. He flags three criticisms of the legal paradigm related to its narrowness, apoliticality, and inability to grasp the depth of experiences of cruelty (Kelly 2011, 17). He doesn't entirely buy these critiques, pointing out that law and politics are less distinct arenas than some critiques imply and that the word torture has "immense force" around which groups do organize effectively and pragmatically to achieve their own diverse aims (Kelly 2011, 18). Perhaps most importantly, he raises the question of the implications that different definitions or understandings have for stakeholders. For instance, under the terms generated by different understandings who is authorized to speak, what can be said, and whose claims are persuasive? It is with these questions in mind that I am inclined to think beyond legal categories, though I concur that "expanding the definition of torture will not inherently expand the scope of protection [the Convention] offers" (Kelly 2011, 19).

In *Torture and Democracy*, Rejali (2007, 39) "reserve[s] the term torture to talk about the state's abuse of public trust." He stays close to the UN definition. For Rejali, an act is torture if four indices are present: 1) a public, or presenting as public, official; 2) a helpless detainee; 3) physical pain; and 4) public purpose. Recently, Rejali shared with me that this was a "definition that had a particular purpose: to narrow the field tightly to test a hypothesis" (pers. comm.). More importantly, he added, "I don't think this is going to be my final position." Understandings shift, including our own, in line with the times, changing contexts, our own shifting perceptions, and what we have learned.

Nick Cheesman (2021), whose empirical work focuses on Myanmar and Thailand, is attentive to the implications of torture for people's potential to recognize themselves as acting, speaking, political beings: "Torture — torment purposefully inflicted on a totally dominated person in the name of a public authority . . . denies the person tortured a body of their own with which to act and a voice of their own with which to speak. It, more than anything else, denies a person their political contents."

Rebecca Gordon (2014) is similarly conscious of the threat to social worlds engendered by torture but reverses the direction of the most common understandings, emphasizing the productive effects of torture on the entities whom the torturer represents. She defines torture as "(i) the intentional infliction of severe mental or physical suffering by an official or agent of a political entity (ii) that aims to dismantle the victim's sensory, psychological, and social worlds (iii) *with the effect of establishing or maintaining that entity's power*" (Gordon 2014, 7, emphasis added).

For Victoria Canning (2023), an exponent of a particularly expansive approach, *torturous violence* is everything that seems, feels, and has effects like torture but for one reason or another doesn't quite live up to the most regularly applied criteria. It is the infliction of violence enabled by coercive control, law, embedded power inequalities, and structurally violent and entitled norms.

Canning pushes back against conventional CAT orthodoxy in an expansive fight against all forms of social harm, particularly those forms that disproportionately affect women and minorities. In *Torture and Torturous Violence*, Canning privileges survivors and those who support them. She advocates against "legalistic orthodoxy" and foregrounds instead an "experiential epistemology" that derives from survivor's lived experiences of compound sufferings and harms (Canning 2023).[8]

As we can see, conventional approaches to defining torture are under constructive attack. Non-lawyers are playing important roles in thinking about the scope and extent of the concept, often driven by their engagement not with law but with torture as a practice with effects and drivers. Meaning-in-use is, as Nelson (2021) surmises, more important in the end than meaning-in-law, even as law can constrain or expand meaning-in-use. I turn now to link an expansive reading of torture to the notion of torturable populations.

What is a torturable population?

Is this even a meaningful question? Isn't anybody potentially torturable, just like anybody is potentially a perpetrator (Haney 2006, Luci 2017, Zimbardo 2007)? While this may be correct in theory — assuming a world of equal opportunities, capacities, and resource distribution — in practice, we know that identity, political circumstances, and local sub-cultures play a mediating role in determining who is most likely to be rendered torturable in any given time, place, or setting. In the murky real world, people are differentially positioned and situated and thereby more or less torturable. Torturable populations can be thought of as groups of people who are rendered torturable in particular ways, to particular degrees, and in particular places by structures and dynamics rooted in hierarchies of value.

For example, during earlier decades of military rule in Myanmar, the most visible or talked about prisoners were pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, or anti-military agitators arrested during demonstrations or raids on their homes. Often, they were students, particularly during the demonstrations in late 1988; in 2007, arrested opponents to the regime included monks. During the period of semi-democratic rule prior to the coup of February 1, 2021, those prisoners recognized as political were more likely to be journalists, environmental activists, or farmers contesting land claims. After the coup, it has been anybody dissenting or acting against the regime, as the military weaponized the criminal justice system once again.[9] What we see here are different categories of people subject to the state's repressive power under changing conditions and circumstances, or different kinds of torturable populations.

Another illustration stems from a review of Iraqi torture survivors' narratives conducted with Darius Rejali at DIGNITY's clinic. As we read through hundreds of case files, we began to get a sense that there were elective affinities that could be identified across particular narratives depending on whether the person was, for example, a deserter from the army, a woman, a student, a member of a political family, and so on. That is, rough patterns associated with specific practices of torture began to suggest themselves. It would be too strong to say we became able to predict the narrative based on a few basic demographic details, but we began to get a sense of commonalities tied to identities. We discovered that the kind of torture techniques particular people were subject to, as well as the duration and rationale for torture, depended on who they were. Further analysis has shown how women, for example, were primarily arrested and tortured as a means of getting at or to their male relatives.[10] They were torturable less for who they were as such

and more for who they were connected to, though the kinds of torture they were subject to were, of course, heavily gendered and sexualized.[11] Their treatment as accessories to men — "wives, daughters, or sisters" — rather than autonomous agents likely also reflects embedded patriarchal societal norms. But the key lesson here is that who you are and how you are connected matters. Different people are torturable in different ways and for different purposes. Some are perceived of as more deserving of torture than others.

Given the respective oppressive histories of these two countries, these examples are mostly about variation within torturable populations. However, they also illustrate the range of actors who can become marked or rendered torturable. The point is the *who* question matters more than is often realized. And the answer to the *who* question changes if we attend to mundane everyday practices of violence and not simply the most spectacular kinds.[12]

Related to the *who* question and the way identity mediates who is subject to torture in any given time or place is the mechanism through which identifiable people or groups of people are marked or rendered torturable. In the end, while it could be anybody, it is not anybody — but specific bodies. Arrest, detention, interrogation, and torture might be labeled and called out as arbitrary in the sense that they are often without legitimate legal grounds, but they are not necessarily arbitrary in the sense of lacking purpose and direction. People subjected to torture are not randomly selected. They become torturable because they are marked in different ways; by being marked as such, they become torturable.[13] Further on in this piece, I consider how thinking about inhibition is a way to address such discursive markings and political renderings. Also anticipating a line of argument I pursue later, there seems to be a clear overlap between torturable populations and those considered worthy of punishment — historically the witch, the outcast, the non-citizen, the non-conformist, the subversive, and the poor.

Celermajer asks why torture thrives even where mechanisms are in place to thwart it. This is perhaps because torture remains hidden from these mechanisms or immune to their effects, or because the inbuilt structural bias of these mechanisms means they are ill-equipped to notice anything except the kinds of torture that easily fit the CAT definition. They are ill-attuned to situational factors or factors where the agent is difficult to identify. An unidentifiable perpetrator is, after all, difficult to prosecute, punish, or hold accountable. But it may be that it is the behind-the-scenes dynamics that need deconstructing if we are to successfully inhibit the practice of torture. Celermajer proposes we pay greater attention to exactly the situations where torture persists even when mechanisms exist to prevent it:

> It is here, in closely tracking what actually happens in concrete situations where torture persists even in the face of the existence of formal laws mandating the correct conditions of detention, that we can begin to come close to understanding the types of factors that keep in place problematic detention practices, or that impede their reform. (Celermajer 2019, 94)

The situational factors that "impede the practical implementation of detention-related measures" (Celermajer 2019, 94) are part of what I call "compromised circumstances" (Jefferson and Jalloh 2018, Jefferson 2022). For Celermajer, these include,

> [B]ureaucratic inertia, the tendency to continue to tread the well-worn path, the dominance of certain disciplinary or professional perspectives, selective expertise, the hegemony of particular approaches, and even the pleasures associated with adopting certain types of strategies and the ethical positions they entail... (Celermajer 2019, 96)

The main point here is to expand the lens on victimhood (the *who* question) and on the multi-layered situational factors that limit efforts to impede torture in conventional ways. It is not only so-called political prisoners or enemies of the state who can be or are rendered torturable. Torture prevention efforts are limited by a range of factors, some of which are rarely subject to critical interrogation — for example, the pleasure taken in being on the side of right and the comfort found in tracing "well-worn" paths rather than innovating. We might also usefully widen the lens on who or what perpetrators are and how they are rendered. This brings us to the notion of the torturing society.

What is a torturing society?

Here, I present three complimentary versions of how we might think about torturing societies. First, a torturing society is simply a society that renders people torturable. Not just one that subjects people to renditions or turns an unseeing eye to so-called black sites, but one that generates and perpetuates relations built on othering, demonization, and the naturalization of hierarchies of worth. A torturing society is not a society infused with a few bad apples who make a few others' lives miserable. A torturing society is one sustained by inequality, riven by entrenched divisions between us and them, and characterized by systems of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls "organized abandonment,"[14] where barriers for some are raised even as they are lowered for others. Torture is a societal issue like prison health is a public health issue (Ross 2013). It implicates us all. It is not like an evil contagion seeping into Gotham's water supply, introduced from the outside. It is intrinsic, not extrinsic. It is not hidden only behind walls or cages; it is hidden in plain sight.[15]

Second, a torturing society is a society propelling a nationalist, securitized, and defensive tradition projecting threat and evil onto outsiders. This is Rebecca Gordon's version. Her account is about the way a "tradition" of national security was propelled in the post-9/11 United States. She is propelled by theology, philosophy, and virtue ethics and writes of torture as a practice with effects on actors and society, enabled by actors and society. She claims her book to be an account of torture as an embedded societal practice — a norm, not an aberration — not simply "a series of discrete and unusual actions, arising suddenly in situations of great extremity." What I take from her analysis is the seepage, the bleed between perpetrating institutions and practices and the societies that give rise to them and render them torturous. She is conscious of complicity, the role we all play in sustaining torturing societies:

> We ourselves may not be torturers, but we are all part, whether we choose to be or not, of the ongoing argument about what practices we will permit to continue, as long as we believe they will keep us secure. Over time, the part we play in that argument can, I believe, become a habit. (Gordon 2011, 140)

Additionally, "habitualization devours" (Shklovsky, quoted in Alsadir 2022, 64). Avery Gordon too registers the exchange relation that renders non-captives complicit in sustaining the carceral punitive project. It is apparently in our interests: The "degraded status" of captives "is deemed required for the rest of our well-being" (Gordon 2011, 13).

Third, a torturing society is a society over-reliant on punishment based on hostility, on negative versions of justice, and individual-focused notions of culpability. In *Feeling the Absence of Justice: Notes on our Pathological Reliance on Punitive Justice*, Anastasia Chamberlen and Henrique Carvalho (2022) set out to explain why the pursuit of justice in Western liberal democracies

is so imbued with punitive logics. Their suggestion is that we primarily experience justice through its negation when we are subject to an injustice. Such experiences evoke, they argue, immediate hostile responses aimed at retribution: partly because the criminal justice system is set up to hold *individuals* accountable even though social psychology should have taught us that social harms are a product of systems and structures (cf. Haney 2006); and partly because we are ill-practiced at nurturing an everyday "lived sense of justice." "Justice as a practice," Chamberlen and Carvalho argue, "is estranged from ordinary people, placed beyond their reach and effectively outside their purview as something which is only done *for* them and *to* others" resulting in a kind of alienation, a sense of distance from justice. Inspired by Iris Marion Young, they push for a conceptualization of justice as a present absence, as something to be pursued, evoked, and actively sought after rather than a quick and immediate response to a sense of taking offense. This is about a shift in orientation and political practice from the infliction of pain to the "call to 'be just'" (Young 1990, 5). "We need to learn," they write, "to be less reactive to the affective call of episodic injustice and to see justice as a more complex and laborious pursuit" (Chamberlen and Carvalho 2022, 94).

These ideas resonate somewhat with Darius Rejali's article *Is there truth in pain*. "The truth of pain," he writes, "is our currency [these days]". We look to pain for "the truth of our manliness, of our justness, of our holiness, of our wisdom, and our intelligence". But there is not truth in pain, argues Rejali — privileging the voice of a woman survivor in his analysis — but deep ontological alienation. For Rejali (2019, 5), talk of torture's effectiveness is simply rhetorical: "Torture is a form of punishment or revenge." If we want people to listen and want to counter torture's appeal, he implies it is necessary to defuse the "implicit call to truth through ordeal" (Rejali 2019, 2) that informs torture's justification. In the same way, I think we need to defuse the call to justice through punishment. We might ask if there is truth in punishment and come to the same conclusion as Rejali (2019): There is no truth, but there is considerable appeal, which cannot be underestimated.

Like Nuar Alsadir, Rejali sees some partial salvation in laughter and smiles but doesn't expect to be listened to much anytime soon. "Patient waiting" (Rejali 2019) is required if the cries of the wronged are to ever be heard. It takes more than rhetoric to enable people to suspend deeply held common sense beliefs that there is truth in pain (and justice in punishment). Others draw attention to the urgency of the matter. Gordon, for example, registers the significance of a "combination of acute timeliness and patience, of there being no time to waste and the necessity of taking your time." This paradoxical temporality characterizes for her the "abolitionist imaginary" (Gordon 2011, 8). What is required is "urgent patience," or obstinate hope (Gordon 2011, 16).

To summarize, torturing societies are over-committed to naturalized ideas of punishment, the propagation of inequalities through practices of "organized abandonment," exclusive (unnuanced and defensive) visions of freedom that don't take entanglement and transactional dependencies seriously, and pathological negative versions of justice that alienate deeply.

I believe there is an audience for whom this might be novel and perhaps even provocative. I think of those on "civilizing" missions, armed with law (soft or hard), human rights, good governance, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, those who wrap their activities in "as if" logics resting on universalizing assumptions, those caught in forms of pedagogy that assume knowledge is transferable and training is *the* answer, and those armed with 'if only' logics: If only potential perpetrators knew better (know what they know); If only they followed the rules (lived by the book); If only they were professional (acted reasonably — in their terms). I have unpacked this further in a recent article on torture prevention and prison reform, which was

originally going to be the basis for the keynote presentation that has become this essay (Jefferson 2022). In it, I argue that while the approaches to anti-torture work driven by the disciplines of law and medicine are necessary, they are not sufficient. I propose the concept "compromised circumstances" to expose the structural biases that diminish and erase ordinary everyday experience. The compromised circumstances of countries torn by conflict, inequality, poverty, and mundane violence call, I argue, for innovative interventions based on reflexive social scientific description and analysis. The inevitable sense of dizziness and uncertainty such circumstances induce must be embraced, not denied.

Perhaps, in fact, there are two contrasting "as if" logics, one rooted in universalizing and homogenizing assumptions that flatten the world and deny difference. This involves treating all situations as if they were alike and therefore finding it appropriate to apply in — for example — poor, authoritarian, and transitional contexts modes of intervention developed in and for stable liberal democracies. An alternative "as if" logic is the one that involves calling forth a different world by inhabiting it differently with a focus both on the always already and the still to come (Caputo 2020, Gilmore 2022, Olthuis 2023). Mariame Kaba refers to this practice as prefigurative. I find more hope in this second less certain, less definitive, and more laborious logic. "To act as if you are free when you are not" is admittedly "a bit crazy," concurs Gordon, but it is from within the confines of (our own) torturing societies that struggles must be initiated to counter torture more imaginatively. I turn now to consider where we might find further inspiration.

On punishment, inhibition, freedom

What to do armed with an ecological understanding of torture that acknowledges populations rendered torturable by the enabling and disabling conditions and actions of torturing societies? As mentioned earlier, I think we need to widen our lens from torture to punishment and from prevention to inhibition. I am proposing two new starting points. Instead of centering torture, why not start with punishment and lived experiences of justice? Instead of torture prohibition or prevention, why not start with inhibition and felt experiences of freedom?

Punishment

To reiterate, I suggest that the anti-torture community may benefit from looking more closely at punishment, to its role in societies, its histories, and its acceptability. The societal (and individual) drive to punish is, I think, a neglected entry point for thinking more radically about how to counter torture. What is torture's relation to punishment? How come one is acceptable and the other is not? These are questions worthy of further attention. And I agree with Chamberlen and Carvalho that we need to discover and learn how to embody a lived experience of justice. We might look to actors like the Scottish Coalition Against Punishment Scotland (CAPS)[16] for inspiration or US-based Project Nia.[17] Another source would be the established tradition of prison abolitionism. Such a venture will not be without its challenges. Those who have tried or are trying know that it is not easy to think or act against punishment, given that punishment, like the carceral apparatus (through which it is instantiated at state level), is "culturally engrained in our consciousness" (Lamble 2021).

Like Chamberlen and Carvalho, Sarah Lamble is committed to thinking against ideas that "equate justice with punishment." Punishment and isolation are not, she believes, the route to

lived experiences of justice. Writing with an abolitionist conviction that is as much about "presencing" new modes of living as abandoning old, Lamble proposes support, safety, healing ,and connection, all the while accepting that these involve hard, active choices as appropriate responses to harm. What is imperative is to develop new modalities of care as well as "dismantl(ing) and transform(ing) the institutions and structures that normalize prisons, police, and punishment" (Lamble 2021). Such practices would be a means of activating an *inhibitive* manifesto.

Inhibition

I am proposing inhibition as an expression of a new generation of anti-torture work in the tradition of what Andre Gorz calls "non-reformist reform." This is an attempt to practicalize the ecological approach to thinking through and against torture and to consider the consequences for action. If one operates with an ecological approach, what does that mean for where the focus should be and what we should be doing?

Inhibition goes beyond saying stop (post-prohibition) and beyond saying educate (post-prevention), instead aiming at denaturalizing and demythologizing strongly held convictions about the benefits of punishment and torture. The term "inhibition" conveys restraint, holding back, or holding in. Inhibitive practices aim to disable the desire, ability, and perceived necessity to torture and thereby transform the conditions under which torture is produced and sustained, to disrupt and uproot the cartographies and topologies that enable torture.

Somewhat ironically, given my distaste for legalistic orthodoxy, the earliest uses of the word inhibition are closely associated with legal prohibition. Only in 1876 did the term become associated with what we might think of as involuntary impulse control. Interestingly, part of the etymology involves a sense of "holding" in connection with the action of giving or receiving — think "withholding," or acting with restraint. A giver/sender and a receiver are implicated in practices of inhibition. Inhibition takes entangled relations seriously.

Inhibition may also imply shame or shyness or a reluctance to come out, speak out, or act. It is not particularly expansive or exuberant. Inhibitive practices might be more everyday and banal than grand and visionary. To promote inhibition is to be grounded, not high-flying. It might be hard to attract funding if it doesn't sound so grand. But grand schemes are no guarantee of disabling structural harms and the problematic outcomes of institutional agency.[18] Inhibition is, one might say, an attempt to create conditions through which restraint becomes involuntary, an attempt to remove the naturalized drivers of the impulse to torture.

To return to the questions of what concrete practices of inhibition might look like and what kind of catalogue of actions we need: Answering such questions is a task for which I often feel ill-equipped. But again, inspiration can be found in the work of the penal abolitionists, and the community-based work of the aforementioned initiatives, the Coalition Against Punishment Scotland (CAPS) and Project Nia. Here what is in focus is care, mutual support, community transformation, resistance to othering and demonization, alliance building, and a search for truly transformative justice positive agendas.

Mariame Kaba, who founded Project Nia, organizes to replace "death-making institutions" with life-giving ones. For Gordon, it is about finding ways to "live otherwise than in the putatively inevitable repetition of the degradations and depredations that injure us" (Gordon 2011,

4). For Lamble, "(E)veryday abolition means undoing the cultural norms and mindsets that trap us within punitive habits and logics." This involves challenging punitive logics in everyday contexts, replacing punishment and isolation with networks of support and connection, building (collective) skills to foster "everyday accountability,"[19] and connecting the everyday to the big picture (Lamble 2021).

Kaba (2019) highlights the importance of decentering the state, or decentering the objectionable institution or practice, from any transformative project. Campaigns around "alternatives to prison," for example, constrain the imagination by putting "prison" at the center of the discourse. To disavow the assumptions that undergird our shared commitment to prison as a solution to social ills and punishment as a route to justice requires a more indirect approach. It might seem counterintuitive to talk less about torture, but it is in this way that it makes sense to approach torture more indirectly via, for example, punishment — or even by totally turning the tables and focusing on ways of achieving justice as a lived experience.

Kaba distinguishes between organizing and advocacy. Advocacy, she implies, can be indifferent ,whereas organizing demands action. Her activism has involved engagement in liberatory, affirmative actions — for example, organizing for the release of women punished for trying to survive. She does not appeal to duty or conscience but leads, we might say, by example. As such, she embodies the kind of manifesto spirit I long for. This spirit was also captured by Bridget Anderson at a Teach-Out on Torture — held on March 15, 2023, at Hamilton House in Bristol, United Kingdom — that marked the launch of Victoria Canning's book *Torture and Torturous Violence*, when she insisted we need to "remake and repair by unsettling" (Anderson 2023).

So what substance might we give an inhibitive manifesto given the considerations sketched so far? What form might unsettlement take? I invite consideration of two practically oriented metaphors — *holding* and *wilding* — that, combined with some of the above tactics, might inform such an unsettling manifesto.

Holding

Alsadir, in her evocatively subtitled book "On laughter and resuscitation," highlights Winnicott's most significant contribution to psychoanalytic theory and practice as being the notion of "holding environments." A holding environment is a space where the child or analysand can express themselves fully without judgement, a space where "whatever they express will be accepted: the good, the savage, and the ugly" (Alsadir 2022, 274), a space of acceptance, acknowledgment, and recognition but also a space of "local accountability."[20]

"To be held" has a powerful double meaning. I am suggesting that to be held in the Winnicottian sense, transposed to the community or societal level, might be a desirable and necessary antidote to being held in a cage, a toxic relationship, or in the suffocating embrace of a police officer.[21] In this vision, inhibition of harm is brought about by *disinhibiting* expressions of hostility, anguish, pain, and alienation within an (em)bracing environment. Core features of this practice are compassion (suffering with) and solidarity (standing with). A rich description of such a practice can be found in Giusi Palomba's *The Alternative Plot*, where she analyzes a practice of social accountability through which social harm is addressed without recourse to the punitive state apparatus through facilitated dialogue and critical self-reflection within a supportive community.[22]

In an imagined post-punishment world, Winnicott's holding environments are "wild spaces" (Olthuis 2023), spaces of resuscitation and free-flowing (rather than suffocating) air. To create wild spaces, a process of *wilding* is required.

Wilding

In the thriving sub-field of green criminology (Sollund 2015, Sollund 2019), attention has been drawn to the phenomenon of rewilding as a means of applying a partial handbrake on environmental devastation, climate degradation, and species extinction.[23] While all words prefixed with re- should be treated with a degree of skepticism,[24] in tandem with holding environments, I wager this one offers some useful analytic purchase. Enabling and engaging in practices of social rewilding or wilding would involve the creation of "holding environments" — places of vigilance and care, not hypervigilance and control; places of possibility or be(com)ing (not to be confused with deceptive linear-inclined metaphors of growth or development); and places of acknowledgement and recognition of spectrumed and intersecting abilities, identities, and diverse histories and positions.

Philosophical theologian James Olthuis (2023, 5) appropriates and subverts the thought of Julia Kristeva developing the idea of "wild spaces of love" that are "uncharted and unpredictable". Within such spaces, he posits, people can flourish and become fully themselves-in-relation. Olthuis' conceptualization of wild spaces involves seeing them not as "gaps of fear and antagonism" but as potential "'betweens'... openings of hope, promise and grace" (2023, xvii). They are admittedly risky, "eerie in their silence, scary in their cacophony, pregnant in their promise" (Olthuis 2023, 161).

Wild spaces are also an explicit feature of pedagogical practice in "alternative" Danish social work circles, developed from the ground up to cater for (that is, "hold") young people who have typically transgressed family, societal, and welfare-oriented norms for acceptable behavior. At the center of these practices, spaces, and ascribed identities (they identify as "wild girls") is the idea that relationships are definitive.

Following Alsadir (2021), such wild spaces might be reinvigorating places of laughter and (re)suscitation. The etymology of resuscitate is striking. It draws on notions of rising up, being summoned, or roused and thus has an almost revolutionary undertone: Rise up! Rouse! Awake! This is a language of manifesto that might be associated with a politics of wilding. It is a call for a wild, transgressive, dirty, proximal, intersubjective, relational, and attentive politics based on practices that are contingent, not coded (Barthes in Alsadir 2021, 314), and provisional, not fixed.[25]

Freedom

By way of a conclusion, I offer a final few thoughts on freedom. Maggie Nelson's *Songs of Care and Constraint* offers subtle hints about freedom rather than a grand narrative of liberation. In her view, freedom can't save us, but neither should we give up on it. She is keen not to cede freedom to the far-right (the freedom to attack, defend, enclose, and confine) nor to reserve freedom for an ultimate end game ("free at last," free in eternity[26]). Nelson recognizes that there is no such thing as pure freedom, and if there was, it might (like other people) be hell and that, in fact, freedom and unfreedom are knotted together . She calls for a nuanced discussion of "practices of

freedom" (Nelson 2021, 6). Practicing freedom, acknowledging mutual reliance and transactional dependencies might, combined with lived experiences of justice, also point towards torture's inhibition.

Torture thrives because of the compromised circumstances that characterize our shared world because commonly used "as if" and "if only" logics don't promote radical change, because difference is too often denied or erased through structural bias; and because there is too little "tolerance for indeterminacy" and not enough "embrace of the joys and pains of our inescapable relation" (Nelson 2021, 17). In this essay, I have suggested that paying attention to the way populations are rendered torturable by torturing societies might be a way to recalibrate our efforts to inhibit torture. At the same time, I have proposed that we take a closer look at the punitive dynamics and logics that sustain our societies, communities, and consciousness and proposed that we foreground lived experiences of justice and felt experiences of freedom. I have proposed the concepts of holding and wilding as a way of thinking about the form such a foregrounding might take. There remains much to be done. The "something-to-be-done," writes Avery Gordon (2011, 5), "is not ever given in advance, but it can be cultivated towards more just and peaceful ends." Let's hope she is right.

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Notes

[1] Andrew M. Jefferson is a senior researcher at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture where for the past two decades he has conducted ethnographic research on prisons and prison reform in non-western contexts. Current work focuses on thinking through ways to inhibit the practice of torture that draw on intellectual traditions associated with prison abolitionism, as well as considering ways to strengthen links between civil society activism and the academy to negate the harmful effects of repression and state power.

[2] A half-century of "contemporary" anti-torture work was kicked off by Amnesty International's Conference for the Abolition of Torture, held in Paris, on December 10–11, 1973.

[3] The CAT, built on the model of the United Nations Declaration of 1975, can be accessed here: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading.

[4] See Jefferson 2016.

[5] See A/74/148: Domestic violence and the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment. July 12, 2019. A/74/148: Domestic violence and the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment — OHCHR Accessed March 20, 2023.

[6] Maggie Nelson, among many others, has argued that where and how words travel is more important than what they are supposed to mean in a doctrinal sense (2021, 5). This is to shift focus from definitions to use and is in the realm of ordinary language philosophy.

[7] For more on zemiologists, see Canning and Tombs 2021 and Pemberton 2016.

[8] Rejali's earlier position would likely find this approach too "cumbersome," at least for the particular task he had in mind, which was to demonstrate the historical linkages between torture and democracy. I suspect that his "final" (probably provisional) position would be more tolerant of cumbersomeness if it could be demonstrated to be an effective strategy to counter cruelty and foster justice.

[9] See Jefferson & Myanmar Research Team, under review.

[10] We had access to 82 women's narratives, 38 of whom were at the clinic in connection with their husband's torture, and 44 because of their own direct experience. Some of those attending in connection with their husbands had also been tortured themselves.

[11] Special thanks to Irlin Osaland who conducted the analysis on this data and collated the report, "The USIP Data Base and Iraqi Women."

[12] In their important work on identification and protection, Steffen Jensen and Toby Kelly have also raised this issue and I acknowledge the inspiration.

[13] cf.: "The captive always appears as marked by an original defect which weights endlessly upon his destiny" (Meillassoux, quoted in Paterson cited by Gordon 2011, 12)

[14] See schulte-organizing-against-abandonment.pdf

[15]Invoking a related sentiment in an address to the UN Human Rights Council in late March 2023, Special Rapporteur on Torture Alice Edwards declared: "When a State fails to defend truth and justice, it becomes an accomplice in torture."

[16]See Coalition Against Punishment Scotland 2023.

[17]See Project Nia 2023.

[18]A related issue here is scalability. To what extent can inhibitive initiatives be scaled up? At first glance, this seems like a reasonable question, but perhaps an expansive, totalizing logic is not what we need. Perhaps a viable alternative to scaling up would be imagining and enabling an ecosystem of discrete, local, diverse, and context-dependent initiatives that coexist to serve communities and inhibit harm and handle harm as it arises. Thanks to Merethe Riggelsen Gjørding for this insight.

[19]In abolitionist/transformational justice circles, accountability can be understood not as an event but as a collective (potentially community) process. Tomas Martin's ongoing work to unpack the concept of "vernacular accountability" has a similar orientation. See also: Russo 2013, Russo 2018, Moss 2019)

[20]Winnicott's notion of a "holding environment" might seem ironic given the anti-torture community's concern with punitive sites of confinement. Think too of the holds of ships within which slaves were confined, or the "holding cells" attached to police stations in Sierra Leone.

[21]The allusion here is to the killing of George Floyd whose cry "I can't breathe" serves as a potent indictment of suffocating, breathless, punitive cultures.

[22]For an English language review of this book, see https://www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-italianist-riveting-italian-books-you-need-to-know-about-by-alex-valente-la-trama-alternativa-the-alternative-plot-by-giusi-palomba/.

[23]See also more popular versions of this recommendation as articulated by, for example, broadcaster and documentarist David Attenborough.

[24]Words beginning with re- such as "reintegration" — when used in relation to either prisoners' post-prison experience, or ex-combatants' post-conflict lives — can be problematic. In this instance, it falsely assumes people were integrated into communities in the first place.

[25]What I propose here are metaphors for thinking.

[26]It seems to me that those who live their lives as though they are "in the world but not of the world" essentially subscribe to a prohibition on breathing (and laughter).