

# Reflections on Solitary Confinement and Resistance to Torture by Gregory Koger

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*“In much the same way that a previous generation of Americans countenanced legalized segregation, ours has countenanced legalized torture. And there is no clearer manifestation of this than our routine use of solitary confinement—on our own people, in our own communities, in a supermax prison, for example, that is a thirty-minute drive from my door.”*

Dr. Atul Gawande<sup>1</sup>

*“The purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in the society at large”*

Federal court testimony of Ralph Arons,  
former warden at Marion federal supermax prison<sup>2</sup>

*“Without a home of my own to return to, the Streets welcomed another lost soul to wander the barren wasteland littered with the broken hopes of countless other thrown-away lives. The landscape of cold, black rivers of asphalt would soon be replaced by razor-wire serpents crawling along the concrete walls and steel bars of the tombs reserved for boys barely grown, sent to be locked away lest their existence disturb the faultless facade finely crafted to conceal the truths that must not be confronted. We must not let them awaken from their American dreams...”*

Gregory Koger

## Quantifying Torture

The exact number of prisoners held in solitary confinement within the US is difficult to ascertain. A 2005 study<sup>3</sup> found that as of 2004, 44 states had supermax prisons holding approximately 25,000 prisoners. This number does not take into account numerous prisoners held in isolation outside of officially designated supermax prisons. For example, Tamms - Illinois sole supermax prison - holds 408 prisoners, while Pontiac - Illinois long-term disciplinary segregation prison - holds 1,733 prisoners<sup>4</sup> in similar conditions of isolation, many for years on end. Estimates for the total number of prisoners held in isolation in the US are estimated to be between 50,000 - 100,000. The unprecedented use of torture in the form of long-term isolation in solitary confinement in US prisons has developed concomitantly with the explosion of mass incarceration in the US since the early 1970s, under the guise of the “war on drugs” and racist New Jim Crow policies that leave the United States with a rate of incarceration for Black males five times higher than apartheid South Africa<sup>5</sup> and where more Black folks are incarcerated or under the control of the criminal “justice” system than there were slaves just before the Civil War<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [Hellhole](#). Atul Gawande. *The New Yorker*. March 30, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> [The Proliferation of Control Unit Prisons in the United States](#). Fay Dowker & Glenn Good. *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, Vol. 4 No. 2 (1993).

<sup>3</sup> “A Critical Look at Supermax Prisons.” Daniel P. Mears. *Corrections Compendium*. 2005.

<sup>4</sup> IDOC Quarterly Report, October 1, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> South Africa near the end of apartheid in 1993 had a rate of incarceration for Black males of 851 per 100,000; the United States in 2001 had a rate of incarceration for Black males of 4,848 per 100,000. *The Prison Index: Taking the Pulse of the Crime Control Industry* (2003). Peter Wagner.

<sup>6</sup> *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Michelle Alexander. 2010.

## Voice of the Voiceless

I've been asked to share some of my personal experience facing torture in the form of long-term isolation in solitary confinement in Illinois prisons. I thought two pieces I've written on my experience in solitary confinement would best capture that. First, an excerpt from *Un-"Corrected"*<sup>7</sup> - a piece I wrote in a prison cell after I had spent nearly 5 years in solitary confinement in Pontiac. And secondly, an excerpt from *Thesis | Antithesis | Synthesis*, which I wrote shortly after my release from prison.

### An Excerpt from *Un-"Corrected"*

"As a prisoner at Pontiac, you will find yourself in an empty concrete and steel box, approximately 6 feet by 10 feet, where you will be confined 24 hours a day. Bare white walls surround you. Don't even think about putting up a photo of your family, a drawing, or anything else on the walls to reduce the drab blankness, because doing so is a violation of the rules and will result in disciplinary action...

You eat in your cell, you get one eight-minute shower per week, and they have individual cages (approximately the size of one and a half or two cells) that you can go outside for approximately two hours, two times a week. Whenever you leave your cell, you will be handcuffed, and sometimes shackled and chained as well. You will be escorted by an officer wherever you go...

You can't wear pants or regular prison clothing. You are forced to wear a tan-colored jumpsuit... The only pen you are allowed to have (and the one I am using now) is tiny and made of flexible rubber and plastic, approximately 3 inches long...

No mirrors are permitted at Pontiac, unlike other prisons with either steel mirrors permanently attached in the cell, or small flexible plastic mirrors. The entire objective here at Pontiac is depersonalization. We wouldn't want you to be able to see yourself, what you look like, or remember that you are an individual...

You will routinely be choked by pepper spray that is used inside the building, usually by the 'tactical team'...

All day, every day is spent in a small drab cell with basically nothing. The property restrictions are such that you can barely possess even a few books, newspapers and magazines, maybe a radio or TV. You will also be subjected to strip searches at various times, have your cell 'shook down,' searched by the officers who will take anything they consider 'excess' or 'altered.' If you run afoul of the officers, you may also receive some 'special treatment:' being denied food, having your personal property stolen, having your water turned off, or beaten, among other things. You will also be given disciplinary 'tickets' for violating arbitrary rules or not answering to the whims of an officer. Your punishment for receiving a 'ticket' can range from lost privileges to lost good time-thus increasing your time spent in prison..."

### An Excerpt from *Thesis | Antithesis | Synthesis*

"Lightly running my fingertips over the concrete wall, I wonder how many other men have been here, how many other times someone has walked in and heard the metal door heavily slam shut behind them, to be left standing alone in this empty cell. Although I'm alone in the cell, a nonstop cacophony continuously bombards my ears. Other men, in other cells just like this one, strain against the solitude by calling out to each other; some to talk, others to argue, and some simply babble nonsensically to themselves.

As I gaze around at the sparse geometry of the empty chamber, I'm struck by the notion that this vacant cube of steel and concrete will be my abode for the foreseeable future. I might be in this particular cell for a week, a month, a year, but even if I'm transferred out of this cell, the next one will be almost exactly identical. Maybe it will have someone else's name jaggedly carved into the paint underneath the bunk, maybe my next neighbor will spend all day and all night in a psychotic rage banging on the walls of his cell, maybe I'll be in a cell with bars on the front as opposed to solid metal, but no matter what trivial differences may await me, the next cell will be just a carbon copy of my current crypt.

Twenty-four hours comprise a day, but time blurs out into timelessness without any environmental cues to differentiate day from night, light from darkness, winter from summer. Days, weeks, months, and seasons pass by while the cell remains the same. Brown leaves gently glide to the ground, the first tiny flakes of snow float past, pile up, then melt away as new green leaves spring forth, all beyond the walls and outside of my reality. Perhaps if I try

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<sup>7</sup> Published from prison in the September 2005 issue of the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center's *The Public i* and the Urbana-Champaign Books to Prisoners Collective's 2006 *Words Through Bars: Poetry, articles and stories written by people in prison*

to peek out of the sliver of a crack next to the cell door I can glimpse a small opaque window and I can tell that it's morning by seeing the faint light beyond straining to penetrate the diabolic darkness within.

I lie on the bunk, staring up at a blank white ceiling, not wispy cotton-clouds stretched thin floating slowly across the pale blue sky, knowing that I cannot move more than a few feet in any direction. Instead of verdant fields of lush green grass beneath my toes, there will only be rough, gray concrete, well-worn by the soles of countless other men pacing the same few feet back and forth continuously. My skin won't feel the gentle caress from the lips of a lover, only the jarring cold steel of handcuffs, chains, and shackles biting into the flesh.

Emptiness consumes me – empty cell, empty days, empty nights, empty life... Or is it I who consumes the emptiness? Becoming the Void into which I have been cast, I seek out Knowledge to fill the barrenness. Letters, words, sentences, ideas, and concepts begin to populate the untapped potential locked away and warehoused within this antisocial abyss of the damned. Books, magazines and newspapers sneak in to join me in my little corner of solitude, subverting the plans of the architects of the sensory deprivation regime designed to destroy men's minds. I refuse to be 'corrected' into the mindless, submissive slave that they – and the system they uphold – require me to be..."

### Resisting Torture and Oppression

As we organize to resist 10 years of torture and indefinite detention in Guantanamo, and in the context of the wave of resistance sweeping the globe from Tunisia and Tahrir Square to the Occupy Wall Street movement, I wanted to close with the inspiring example of the California prison hunger strikes. For three weeks in July, and another three weeks beginning at the end of September, thousands of prisoners in over one-third of California's prisons came together across racial and other dividing lines fostered by prison administrators put their lives on the line on hunger strikes to demand an end to the inhumane conditions of torture they face. Currently, prisoners in segregation at Corcoran prison are on a hunger strike that began December 28th. In the midst of the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Comrade George Jackson, the foremost prison-educated revolutionary intellectual and theorist of the Black Panther Party, on August 21, 1971 and the righteous rebellion of prisoners at Attica Prison in New York three weeks later, the hunger strikers in California once again placed the heroic example of prisoners at the forefront of the struggle against oppression.

Check the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity website for ongoing news and actions in support of the prisoners:

<http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/>

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