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The prison-televisual complex

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Abstract

In 2016, the A&E cable network partnered with the Clark County Jail in Jeffersonville, Indiana, to incarcerate seven volunteers as undercover prisoners for two months. This article takes the reality television franchise *60 Days In* as a case study for analyzing the convergence of prison and television, and the rise of what we call the prison-televisual complex in the United States, which denotes the imbrication of the prison system with the television industry, not simply television as an ideological apparatus. *60 Days In* represents an entanglement between punishment and the culture industries, whereby carceral logics flow into the business and cultural practices of entertainment, and the demands of the attention economy – ratings, content, profitability, sharing – come to bear on the prison as a disciplinary institution. The prison-televisual complex, we argue, participates in and facilitates carceral governing practices, including the TV industry's involvement in the classification, criminalization, and warehousing of dispossessed populations.

Keywords

biopolitics, governmentality, mass incarceration, media industries, neoliberalism, race, reality television

In 2016, the A&E cable network partnered with the Clark County Jail in Jeffersonville, Indiana, to incarcerate seven volunteers as undercover prisoners for two months. With only a few high-ranking prison officials in on the experiment, producers installed 300 cameras and 70 microphones in the correctional facility under the pretense of making a documentary about first-time prisoners. The trailer for *60 Days In* introduces the

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“law-abiding” citizens willing to go behind bars with faux police mug shots as ominous music plays. Gritty scenes of actually incarcerated people eating, sleeping, fighting, and being disciplined by guards are interspersed with close-up images of jail cells, handcuffs, and barbed-wire fence. Weekly episodes revolve around the motivations, experiences, conflicts, and emotions of the clandestine prisoners, crafted through observational-style footage, 24/7 surveillance camera recordings, and confessional interviews, interspersed with occasional infographics citing statistics on U.S. mass incarceration. Fusing the conventions of commercial reality television – seriality, authenticity, melodrama, spectacle, ordinary celebrity, and suspense – with a promise to expose and reform life behind bars, the series drew notoriety and high ratings, prompting a franchise, including a sequel in Indiana and subsequent seasons in Atlanta, Georgia, and Florence, Arizona. As with most reality entertainment, the broadcast episodes are closely tied to a multi-platform social media presence, including live Facebook chats with undercover participants, a mini-social media series entitled “How to Survive Prison,” and opportunities for TV viewers to comment, re-tweet, like, and otherwise partake in digital extensions of penal spectatorship (Brown, 2009).

This article takes *60 Days In* as a case study for analyzing the convergence of two seemingly disparate and unrelated institutions – prison and television – and the rise of what we call the *prison-televsual complex* in the United States. The prison-televsual complex denotes the imbrication of the prison system with the television *industry*, not simply television as an ideological apparatus, or medium for *representing* prison in particular ways that uphold power dynamics. Although fictional television series like *Oz*, *Prison Break*, and *Orange is the New Black* have showcased mass incarceration as imagined by writers, directors, and producers, *60 Days In* represents a much deeper entanglement between punishment and the U.S. culture industries, whereby carceral logics flow into the business and cultural practices of entertainment, and the demands of the attention economy – ratings, content, profitability, branding, sharing – come to bear on the prison as a disciplinary institution. Drawing from scholarship on mass incarceration, reality television, and neoliberal governmentality, we suggest that the reinvention of the prison as a cultural industry, triggered by neoliberal mantras of privatization, cost-cutting, and entrepreneurialism, situates the U.S. television industry within what Jackie Wang (2018) calls *carceral capitalism* – a stage of profit making that relies on the exploitation and commodification of racialized, poor, and dispossessed populations. The prison-televsual complex, we argue, participates in and facilitates carceral governing practices as well: television’s role is not limited to the cultural mediation of mass incarceration, but includes the TV industry’s involvement in the classification, monitoring, criminalization, and warehousing of populations deemed risky, dangerous, and deviant, and in the production and circulation of knowledge of surplus populations warehoused in penal institutions.¹ Through its business practices, storytelling modes, and encouraged forms of spectatorship, the television industry actively participates in the subjection of people to profiling, state violence, expropriation, harsh disciplinary mechanisms, and what Lisa Cacho (2012) and others call “social death.”

The practice of “disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities” through imprisonment is linked to carceral logics of value (Davis A, 1998). The unequal distribution of life chances also relies on an

administrative apparatus that sorts people according to categories (race, class, gender, ability), producing populations with uneven “levels of vulnerability to economic exploitation, violence, and poverty” (Spade, 2015: 2). The prison-televsual complex monetizes and extends this biopolitical process – by aligning itself with carceral capitalism for entertainment purposes, by setting up shop in penal institutions, and by participating in the monitoring, classifying, and governing of racialized and classed populations deemed ungovernable and disposable. In this respect, television operates as a *literal* (not only figurative or representational) component of the prison-industrial complex. At the same time, the commercial success of prison-based reality entertainment encourages the prison to take on attributes of a culture industry in the context of public sector privatization, precarity, and neoliberal enterprise culture. *60 Days In* hinges on the exchange of public infrastructures and the uncompensated labor of incarcerated people and prison workers (as unwitting talent for the shows) for resources like the latest surveillance cameras and otherwise prohibitively expensive body scanners. High-ranking prison officials operate not only as agents of discipline and control but also as micro-celebrities and informal co-producers, with a role in casting, setting, editing, and promoting the productions in which they appear. By situating mass incarceration within an “economy of visibility” (Banet-Weiser, 2015), the prison-televsual complex infuses the carceral state with cultural enterprise, social currency, and even glamour.

The prison as culture industry

As critical prison studies scholars have shown, the prison-industrial complex and neoliberalism (understood as both a racial and class project, and a market-based political rationality) emerged hand in hand.² During the 1980s, partnerships between the state, industry, and U.S. prisons garnered “vast amounts of capital,” Angela Davis (2003) contends, resembling the military-industrial complex in scope and profitability (2003: 12). The state and the private sector invested in carceral technologies bolstered by draconian penal policies like the “three strikes laws,” resulting in the intensified proliferation of prisons and prison culture (police, lawyers, and trials) more broadly (Gilmore, 2007: 6). According to Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) the prison-building boom of the 1990s, the push to privatize prisons, and the normalization of carceral logics were inextricable from the decline of social services and other neoliberal policies and reforms. Racial and class inequality were central to the rise of mass incarceration as a lucrative industry and a punitive apparatus. Disenfranchised populations deemed ungovernable and disposable through logics of consumer choice and personal responsibility have been subjected to harsher and more pervasive mechanisms of discipline and control, including police surveillance and brutality, algorithmic profiling and monitoring, segregation, and imprisonment (Cacho, 2012; Dayan, 2011). *60 Days In* inserts the U.S. television industry and its digital media extensions into carceral capitalism by reinventing the prison as a site of cultural entrepreneurialism and commercial media production, and activating television as a racialized technology of governing (Gilmore, 2007: 2, 10). This strategic partnership constitutes a twist in the politics of mass incarceration and a shift in the mediation of prison life. We suggest the prison-televsual complex as a conceptual framework for understanding these intertwined dynamics.

Since the early 2000s, U.S. television has taken the enclosed and controlled spaces, disciplinary tactics, and subjects of “real-life” incarceration as the basis for a burgeoning strand of nonfiction entertainment. This trend follows a spate of reality-based law enforcement programs, from the iconographic series *COPS* to entertainment built around the activities of SWAT teams, detectives, special forces, highway patrols, homeland security officers, and local and national police.³ Just as law enforcement programming relies upon the cooperation and participation of police departments and governing agencies, prison TV requires the involvement of jails, correctional facilities, and prisons. The support of penal institutions makes possible dozens of recent and current programs, including *Jail* (Court TV, 2007), *Hard Time* (National Geographic, 2009), *Lockup* (MSNBC, 2005), *Inside American Jail* (TruTV, 2007), *Life After Lockup* (MSNBC, 2012), *Women in Prison* (Investigation Discovery, 2015), *Cellblock 6: Female Lockup* (TLC, 2010), *Behind Bars* (A&E, 2010), *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up* (Netflix, 2018), and *Love After Lockup* (WE tv, 2018). These programs circulate across a range of broadcast and cable channels and platforms, bringing TV viewers inside the initial booking and incarceration processes, crowded and decrepit prison interiors, routine confinement and extreme punishments like solitary confinement,⁴ and prison rehabilitation programs. *60 Days In* delivers a new spin on this burgeoning strand of reality-based programming by sending “ordinary” people who have not been convicted of a crime to serve prison sentences while cameras roll (Keane and Moran, 2008).⁵

The stated premise of *60 Days In* is that volunteers go undercover to provide sheriffs, wardens, and other officials with intelligence about “crime and corruption” occurring within the institution’s walls. In the debut episode of season 1, Sheriff Jamey Noel reminds TV viewers that this mission is “unprecedented,” noting that he chose the seven participants “because I felt like they were strong enough to handle being locked in our facility for 60 days.”⁶ The cast of each season is comprised of archetypes, including the activist seeking to reform the prison system; the conservative skeptic who believes “the system” is too lax; and the enterprising aspirant hoping to advance a career in law enforcement or corrections. Each episode features footage from the various “pods” or units of the institution and the manufactured drama of whether those who are actually incarcerated will discover the true identities of the volunteers and expose the undercover program. Simultaneously, the show constructs a “fish-out-of-water” narrative, with the volunteers shown to be shocked by various aspects of life in jail, from the meals to the living conditions to the people who are incarcerated.⁷ In this way, *60 Days In* takes mass incarceration as the raw material for reality entertainment, transforming the prison into an extension of the culture industries.

Although TV viewers are promised a “shocking and terrifying” experience as they encounter the stark realities of prison, this selling point is undercut by a simultaneous recognition of prison as a foundation of both popular entertainment and material life. Michelle Brown’s (2009) theory of “penal spectatorship” is instructive here. For Brown, the prison, and punishment more generally, has always been primarily accessed by most people through cultural engagement beyond the walls of actual carceral institutions. The penal spectator is one who is remote (Brown, 2009: 14); in an increasingly mediated world, viewers are invited to inhabit the role of the penal spectator vicariously as punishment and carcerality are narrativized and spectacularized for profit. At the same time,

punishment is itself a formative, albeit often invisible, grammar of everyday life. Carcerality is a structuring logic akin to Gilmore's (2007) theorization of the prison as the central locus of power in the 21st century, affecting all facets of life, both inside and outside of the prison's walls (Brown, 2009: 11). The prison constitutes the categories "freedom" and "unfreedom" (and their corresponding subjectivities), while also shaping material realities, from employment to geographic space.

The ordinariness of incarceration is established in the opening footage of the first episode of *60 Days In*. Situated in the heart of Jeffersonville, Indiana, the Clark County Jail occupies a central position within the town. The medium-long and aerial shots of the jail's exterior reveal what Wilson Gilmore (2007: 11) calls the "breadth" of the carceral system: prisons reside not "at the margins of social spaces, economic regions, political territories, and fights for rights," but rather, are at the center. Throughout each season, shots of the jail's exterior, the sunrise, and the surrounding landscape are deployed in juxtaposition to the jail's hellish interior and to constitute "free" space, yet at the same time, these scenes underscore just how naturalized the carceral is within U.S. communities, particularly when prisons and jails serve as the main source of employment. Jackie Wang (2018), for instance, shows how municipalities depend on the monetization of punishment beyond the prison's walls to fund local governments. This "racialized expropriation," she suggests, relies on the "police and the criminal justice system to loot residents of primarily black jurisdictions" via fines, policing, debt, and incarceration (Wang, 2018: 76–7). But additionally, there is the labor performed by those who are incarcerated – prisoners make furniture, sew clothes for Victoria's Secret, harvest produce, staff call centers, manufacture military equipment, and fight wildfires in California.⁸ With this labor, the prison becomes an enterprise, fostering the illusion of earning its own keep and minimizing reliance on the public sector in synchronicity with neoliberal imperatives. What is new is that prison labor has also become instrumental to the manufacture of immaterial cultural goods – images, meanings, narratives, symbolic practices – including *60 Days In* and the broader wave of prison-themed reality television.

On *60 Days In* as with other reality programs, prison labor operates in multi-layered ways. First, incarcerated people are (unbeknownst to them) laboring for the television production by serving as the setting and cast. In performing this uncompensated labor, they generate value for the prison (which exchanges their labor for resources and donations from media companies), and for the network that profits from their visibility. The labor the incarcerated people expend as cast members of a monetized reality show also contributes to the production of "common sense" as structured by the carceral state (Keeling, 2007: 98). Finally, capital's insatiable quest to find cheaper labor to exploit means that racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized populations also provide a necessary "surplus" from which capital can extract ever more value. The entanglement of racial formations with neoliberal capitalism is critical to understanding how prisons – institutions charged with controlling, containing, and managing those populations rendered threatening and disposable – *also* revalorize these same populations as potentially profitable "reserves." Incarcerated people on *60 Days In* can be understood as a "reserve army" – not of consumers (although reality-based prison programs do circulate in prisons) but of *workers* whose potential for exploitation is manifold (Keeling, 2007: 104). Incarceration itself is profitable: prisons require bodies to fill beds, and, as

many scholars and activists have shown, incarceration generates value for capital.⁹ Now, prisoners are also made available as bodies, extras, and props for the culture industries. As a surplus in waiting, they function as a “potentially productive reservoir” for commercial productions that move in and out of correctional facilities in search of untapped and authentic sources of reality entertainment (Keeling, 2007: 105). Although reality television is notorious for exploiting the free labor of amateurs as well as audiences, and the genre is always already exploitative and precarious, this reliance on forced prison labor suggests that even incapacitated and disposable populations are seen as exploitable for value extraction.

Such is the case on *60 Days In* (produced by Lucky8 for A&E), where incarcerated people housed at the correctional facility serve as extras and, in some cases, as recurring characters in dramatic and sensationalist plotlines crafted for television’s profit-seeking entertainment purposes. Prison guards and officials double as uncompensated on-screen talent as well, paid by A&E only when their unpaid work as characters on the television production takes their waged labor into overtime (*Courier Journal*, 2016). Beyond the question of prison labor, the infrastructure of the prison is harnessed for props, sets, facilities, and other resources needed for the TV production. When programs are filmed at public jails and correctional facilities, this amounts to a public subsidy to the corporate television industry, but it also renders the prison entrepreneurial. Typically, TV production companies pay a small stipend to the institutions in which they film – an extremely lucrative arrangement compared to the cost of filming on a studio set. A&E paid the Clark County Jail \$60,000, but also left behind the hundreds of hidden cameras and monitors used to record footage for the program – show business equipment that continues to operate as prison surveillance technology (Gross, 2016). In yet another strategic partnership, the tech company Bexel, which sells surveillance and security equipment to private firms, provided robotics cameras in exchange for plugs and the ability to profit from its role in the TV program in surveillance industry trade advertisements.¹⁰ Sheriff Noel from seasons 1 and 2 has continued to capitalize on the program, selling T-shirts and tater tots – the latter a desired food among incarcerated people on the show – as a fundraiser.¹¹ These calculated alliances present the prison with an entrepreneurial alternative to public funding for its governmental work, but they hardly exhaust its foray into cultural entrepreneurialism and media production.

Prison officials also participate in crafting and marketing *60 Days In* as a cultural text. Sheriff Noel, who oversees the Clark County Jail, set the template by working with producers to select and coach the volunteers, monitoring camera and audio footage from control rooms housed inside the jail, and approving storylines and scene selections. Penal institutions, prison officials, and prisoners also figure in A&E’s digital media blitz to encourage and monetize user participation and cross-platform interactivity. The logics of the prison-televisual complex extend to the realm of social media, where the circulation of promotional video clips, supplementary content, GIFs, and images from *60 Days In* and other programs bolster the economic rewards for media companies and prisons alike. *60 Days In* has an active Facebook page with 265 million followers, a robust website, and a Twitter handle; through these platforms, the audience helps create awareness and brand value for the series by liking, sharing, re-tweeting, commenting, and interacting with each other, prison officials, and participants. At the same time, fans are allowed

to participate in the series and expand upon the vicarious experience of prison life it claims to offer. As penal spectators, users and viewers are enlisted into the mode of surveillance and control operationalized by the prison, blending voyeuristic pleasure with the production of common-sense knowledge about mass incarceration. For example, in the mini-social media series “How to Survive Prison,” an offshoot of the television text, the subjugated knowledges of inmates rendered unfree and disposable by carceral logics are packaged and sold as entertainment for social media users imagined to be white and middle class. Set to dramatic music, these tie-in videos highlight the make-do tactics of imprisoned populations for the purpose of extracting amusement and profit from these practices. One video demonstrates step-by-step how incarcerated people make cosmetics, unavailable in most prisons, from the unauthorized use of powdered drinks and other materials; another explains “jailhouse dental hacks”; a third offers a tutorial in how to transform the “unappealing food served as punishment in prisons” into facsimiles of pizza and other desired edibles.¹²

Whereas the actual incarcerated people of prison TV are forced laborers with no way to capitalize on their participation in the show, the undercover participants and prison officials are situated within the neoliberal logic of visibility and self-enterprise. These characters are positioned to seek exposure, self-empowerment, and micro-celebrity through the show and its affiliated social media presence. For example, prison officials regularly star in live Facebook specials with a rotating cast of undercover participants, where they discuss the program and answer questions from social media users. Through these publicity events and his many media appearances, Noel emerged as an “instafamous” celebrity warden who crisscrossed carceral institutions, online social networks, and popular media culture for the benefit of the Clark County Jail, fans, and viewers alike. This generates currency for the franchise and a fleeting fame for its real-life characters, while also highlighting and naturalizing the prison’s rising visibility and place in circuitries of cultural production, circulation, and exchange. Volunteer cast members are stitched into the enterprising logic that orients reality television production, particularly the promise that their free labor will eventually pay off in the form of celebrity or financial remuneration. With no social safety net under carceral capitalism, constituting oneself as a marketable brand functions as a prerequisite to navigating precarity; similarly, garnering fame and visibility through social and digital media platforms like YouTube and Instagram is proffered as means to surviving and thriving under late capitalism (Hearn, 2010: 421). Several of the participants have established degrees of micro-celebrity through the show and its digital paratexts. Many also stated an explicit goal of using their time on the show as a stepping stone to a job in corrections or law enforcement, thereby participating in what Brooke Duffy (2016) has called “aspirational” or “hope” labor. These volunteers are constituted as enterprising subjects who might successfully transform their increased media visibility into a career. Participation in the program is thus constructed as mutually beneficial, a message that is repeated throughout the series as multiple participants describe their goal of using their televised experience to get a job. The promise that reality television can make this happen was made particularly explicit when Sheri, an undercover prisoner featured in season 2, became the star of the spin-off special episode *60 Days In: From Inmate to Officer*, which follows her return to the Clark County Jail as a corrections officer.¹³

The entrepreneurialism that enables *60 Days In* complements social life under carceral capitalism, wherein normative subjects are expected to self-enterprise in order to manage, navigate, and overcome precarious conditions. Those who are actually incarcerated are not invited or expected to enterprise themselves in this way, as their role is to represent the flip side of neoliberal subjectivity – the racialized, deeply marginalized and exploited “others” whose unfreedom circulates across converged media platforms as a reminder of what carceral governmentality involves.

TV as carceral governing

In *Carceral Capitalism*, Jackie Wang (2018) traces the impact of nearly fifty years of neoliberal policies on racialized governance in the United States. Placing her analysis within the context of deregulation, privatization, and the downscaling of public services, Wang documents a shift from the postwar tax state (the welfare state), to the debt state (that emphasizes austerity and personal responsibility), to the emergent “predatory state, which functions to modulate the dysfunctional aspects of neoliberalism” (Wang, 2018: 170). In the predatory state, she argues, “governments have sought to balance the budget on the backs of the poor, the unemployed, and black and brown people” (2018: 18). This has involved prison expansion and intensified surveillance, as well as new forms of social disinvestment that rationalize the criminalization of poor communities of color in the wake of acute societal neglect. We have shown how the reinvention of the prison as an entrepreneurial cultural industry, triggered by mantras of privatization, cost-cutting, and entrepreneurialism, places the U.S. television industry within carceral capitalism. Here, we elaborate on how the prison-televisual complex also participates in the emerging forms of predatory governmentality described by Wang and other scholars.

60 Days In capitalizes on the voyeuristic display of gritty, shocking scenes of prison life, and the inevitable drama and suspense that ensues when civilian cast members attempt to pass as incarcerated people. TV viewers are offered an “authentic” carceral experience modeled on Hollywood versions of prison violence and mayhem, as well as stock-in-trade reality television storylines edited to emphasize personalities, backstories, conflicts, and emotional “money shots” (Dubrofsky, 2009; Grindstaff, 2002). At the same time, the franchise situates its undercover experiment within a “do-good” tradition (Ouellette, 2012) of reality television programming, claiming the series will contribute to understanding, improving, and reforming prison as an increasingly problematized institution. At a time when mass incarceration has become a topic of discussion for activists, political candidates, and pundits alike, and books like Michelle Alexander’s (2012) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* are bestsellers, production companies, sponsors, and networks are eager to capitalize on rising concerns about growing rates of imprisonment. The introductory credits and promotional teasers for *60 Days In* reference astronomical rates of U.S. incarceration, especially among African American men. Informational graphics woven into the television episodes present additional statistics on imprisonment across race and gender, problematizing the unevenness of mass incarceration, while also lending a progressive, educational element to the series. However, *60 Days In* does not advocate the abolition of prisons, nor does it allow for a critique of carceral capitalism or the racialized and classed biopolitics of

disposability upon which it depends. Rather, it taps into progressive discourses to justify its own role in commodifying the “realities” of mass incarceration through the language of authenticity, documentation, and reform (Tagg, 1988).

For example, the *60 Days In* website features a “True Crime” blog that links the franchise to a genealogy of progressive social reform, including documentary filmmaking and investigative reporting. This tradition is exemplified by filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman, who filmed his controversial documentary *Titicut Follies* (1967) inside the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane at Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and by critical journalists who go undercover into correctional facilities and jails for purposes of exposure, education, and the public good. While elements of this discourse frame the *60 Days In* franchise, the sincerity of social reform is deflated and trivialized by prison operations and promotional demands. Each season, sheriffs and other prison officials explain their desire to use the reality program to uncover violence, drug use, abuse, and other problems *within* prisons, but the societal problems linked to mass incarceration do not register among these highly visible officials. Promotional discourse sometimes does connect *60 Days In* to wider understandings of social reform and the residual public interest tradition in broadcasting, as exemplified by a video teaser that asks the viewer, “If it was to help the greater good, would you go to jail for 60 days?” However, this implied connection to prison reform is dubious given the program’s dependency on the prison as a source of cheap content, and unapologetic packaging of incarceration as penal entertainment, as clarified by another teaser: “Anyone up for a little laser tasing?” However contradictorily, *60 Days In* is positioned as an *interventionist* project to the extent that it promises to not only represent, but also change, the dynamics of mass incarceration. This does not minimize the program’s role in predatory governing so much as it reinforces Foucault’s (1977) astute observation that problematization and reform are not antithetical to the expansion of carceral logics, but in fact have always been part of the prison’s rationality.

What is interventionist about *60 Days In* is television’s constitutive role in biopolitical forms of racialized and classed governance. The increased surveillance, documentation, and monitoring of imprisoned populations through reality television programming – and the production and circulation of knowledge about these populations for prison officials and audiences alike – marks a shift in U.S. reality television’s operation as a technology of governing. As Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008) demonstrate, reality television took shape in the late 1990s alongside the neoliberal reinvention of postwar liberalism as a public–private partnership emphasizing market rationalities and a culture of enterprise. Reality TV, sometimes assisted and/or endorsed by cities, governments, and elected officials, played a pedagogical role in shaping and guiding citizens to accommodate rising market pressures and shifting political rationalities.¹⁴ For several decades, the genre has mobilized techniques of shaming, surveillance, self-help, and behavioral modification to transform floundering individuals into responsible and enterprising neoliberal citizens. This mission was connected to mass incarceration in makeover shows like *From G’s to Gents* (MTV, 2008), which claimed to transform racialized and impoverished participants into so-called respectable and responsible entrepreneurs of the self as an *alternative to incarceration* (Page, 2015). The emerging prison-televisual complex requires television to abandon this transformative narrative, and instead perpetuates a logic of

permanent socioeconomic bifurcation that presumes the ongoing incapacitation and warehousing of those rendered criminal and disposable. Despite the fact that some of the volunteer prisoners have critical views of racialized mass incarceration, the *60 Days In* franchise and other reality-based prison programs ultimately intensify the racialized and classed hierarchies of capacity – the notion that some are worthy of self-governance and life, and others are not – on which incarceration depends.

The surveillance and confinement of individuals constituted as a population incapable of self-governing – the actual prisoners – is aided and intensified by the arrival of television crews who bring new equipment (cameras, microphones, observational control rooms) to monitor life behind bars. The hierarchy between the volunteers (understood as representatives of the self-governing citizenry) and the prisoners is constituted through filming practices that render prison populations interchangeable and anonymous, filmed as faceless bodies and body parts (tattoos, fists) and narrated as animals with comparisons between the prison and the zoo, and official commentary such as “the inmates are showing Zac they accept him.” The episodes intersperse generic surveillance footage of decontextualized prison violence throughout the documentary footage and confessionals with the undercover participants, accentuating the differences between them. When imprisoned people emerge as individuals with particular names and social histories, it is only to highlight dramatic incidents and conflicts with the primary characters, such as incidents of stealing, a conflict over a sleeping arrangement, or the threat of violence in a cellblock. This occasional focus on the incarcerated is ultimately banal and transposable, as quotidian forms of violence and deprivation permeate the everyday lives of those confined within the prison walls.

The interchangeability and disposability of the prisoners, accentuated through filming techniques and narrative choices, mirrors other prison-themed reality programs like *Jail* and *Lockup*, where incarcerated people are handcuffed, fingerprinted, detained, and pepper sprayed repeatedly, rendering their capacity for transformation – and the responsibilities and freedoms it promises – unlikely. What reality-based prison programming makes visible is the mode of predatory governing applied to populations (people of color, the impoverished) relegated to confinement and disposability within a “culture of control” (Garland, 2001). Because of these reality programs, punishment and incarceration are now on perpetual display, exhibited across cable channels and circulated through social media as part of the cultural iconography of carceral capitalism. Given its exploitative production processes, commercial reality television’s very nature could be said to be inextricable from the logics of carceral capitalism. *60 Days In* is an especially obvious and literal example because it simultaneously assists in and capitalizes on mass incarceration. The series and related shows can be understood within the realm of what Laurie Ouellette has called “dispossession TV,” a cluster of reality programming aimed not at reforming participants, but that contributes to the growing cruelty of late capitalism and the capitalization of social death in the form of repossession (of homes, cars, and things) following the 2008 recession. Although dispossession TV sutures the TV industry into predatory capitalism, these shows are often haunted by what (and whom) they dispossess – namely, those rendered disposable and cast aside, mined for any residual value according to brutal neoliberal logics (Ouellette, 2017: 14–16.) Such is also the case

with *60 Days In* and its ilk, which capitalize on and control incarcerated people who are nevertheless always visible, however blurry and indistinguishable they may be.

Reality productions like *60 Days In* modify television's role in predatory governance for a 21st-century context. When the show offers a commentary on the realities of post-welfare precarity – for instance, in season 5, one of the undercover participants is sympathetic to a man jailed for stealing groceries for his family – this is quickly folded back into the logics of carceral capitalism, framed as an aberration rather than the norm. The normalization of precarity as the paradigmatic condition of late capitalism has extended logics of disposability to populations once relatively shielded from their reach (Lorey, 2015: 8), and the racialized and classed project of the prison-industrial complex intensifies these rationalities. *60 Days In* reveals – often inadvertently, occasionally for dramatic flourish – the horrors of U.S. incarceration and the effects of an ongoing state of precarity, wherein racialized and classed populations are expelled from society, even as the techniques used to control them (algorithmic monitoring, perpetual documentation, surveillance, segmentation, and clustering) make their way into consumer culture, social media, and rationalities of governing under carceral capitalism. At the same time, the franchise accentuates the perpetual visibility of incarcerated populations, a visibility that is *necessary* in order to rationalize hierarchies within carceral capitalism and to construct assumptions about who is deserving of the freedom of self-government, and who is not. Despite the attempt to create drama, *60 Days In* is slow-paced relative to other reality programs, and this banality is part of what makes it so chilling: the violence and cruelties – both small and large – daily endured by the actually incarcerated are so commonplace and naturalized that the show is unable to fully capture them. For instance, in season 1, a female participant witnesses a suicide attempt by one of the prisoners, and in an attempt to make a spectacle of the horror, the shots of blood on the floor are overlaid with the woman's moans and screams. After a cut to the sheriff who states "Jail is tough. It's hard on people," the show turns to the female participant, a 25-year-old white stay-at-home mom, who highlights how incarceration renders this unremarkable, telling the producers, "nobody's really shocked."

60 Days In constitutes prisoners as unruly "others" in need of containment while simultaneously displaying the logics of what Jonathan Simon (2007) calls "governing through crime." Similar to Wang's analysis, Simon argues that the welfare state has been subsumed within an increasingly harsh regime of policing and detention. Social problems ranging from welfare dependency to educational inequality have been reconceptualized as crimes, and populations cast as risky and deviant are subjected to intensified mechanisms of control as the supposed rehabilitation of prisoners has given way to the warehousing of masses of impoverished and racialized populations (Spade, 2015: 24–5). In season 1, Jeff, a white man in his 30s seeking to pivot his time on the show into a career as a prison guard, summarizes his experience behind bars with an implicit acknowledgment of the criminalization of poverty and mental health: "I just feel sorry for these people. Because almost everybody I talked to wanted to better their lives but they found no way out. They need help. And jail is not helping them." This observation echoes that of many of *60 Days In*'s participants across various seasons, who often conclude their role in the televised experiment with a newfound recognition of the social vulnerability of those who are locked up. This realization arises because of an

oft-unacknowledged awareness – putatively gained through the participants’ embodied witnessing – of how the predatory state manages disenfranchised bodies and populations through criminalization and containment rather than care.

As scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), Angela Davis (2003), and others have detailed, the prison-industrial complex is deeply racialized, with prisoners of color comprising 37% of the U.S. population, but 67% of the U.S. prison population.¹⁵ With the publication of Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2012), public attention was drawn to the racial disparities of mass incarceration. For Gilmore and other prison abolitionists, the point is not to make this percentage more equal, but to understand the role of the prison in classifying free and unfree populations of color, or otherwise. As Gilmore explains, “During most of the modern history of prisons, those officially devoid of rights – indigenous and enslaved women and men, for example, or new immigrants, or married white women – rarely saw the inside of a cage, because their unfreedom was guaranteed by other means” (2007: 12). Gilmore’s germinal definition of racism as the “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007: 21) is resonant here, as *60 Days In*’s promise to expose, observe, and allow TV viewers the opportunity to vicariously experience life behind prison walls hinges on a racialized and classed division of those who are assumed to be capable of managing their freedom through acts of choice and self-control, and those who are presumed to lack these capacities.

In the debut episode, which set the stage for the franchise as a whole, the faux prisoners learn this lesson when they undergo training with an “expert on inmate behavior,” who tells them:

Imagine you take a bunch of individuals that can’t conform to our rules and regulations in our society, and you put them in a confined area. And you live with those individuals day in, day out. Things are going to happen.

Over shots of actual prisoners, some of whom have been incarcerated since they were teenagers, he continues:

The people that you’ll be dealing with, they were raised on the streets, by the streets. The only thing they know is the streets. When you were going to school at 12 years old, worrying about math tests and spelling bees, they’re out there fighting. Different societies, different set of rules.

60 Days In constitutes those rendered “different” as disposable and deviant, even as it also reveals the pervasiveness of carceral logics and the ordinariness – and normalization – of mass incarceration in the United States.

This is not to say that the logic of personal transformation has no place in the *60 Days In* franchise. Reminiscent of the 1978 documentary *Scared Straight*, which attempted to prevent criminality by placing “at-risk” juveniles in the company of incarcerated people, the first season narrates the undercover participation of a young black man as a form of personal risk management, preventing his presumed future criminality by showing him life on the inside. When his mother visits, she explains to the cameras that she wants Isaiah to “appreciate his freedom on the outside so he learns to stay out of trouble”; when

he questions his participation in the show and considers leaving, she talks him into staying. Throughout the season, *60 Days In* constructs him as succumbing to negative influences, and at risk for actual charges should he do something illegal in the context of the experiment. In the end, he is “saved” by a white volunteer cast member who tries to recruit him to the military and who is positioned as a positive role model for all of the incarcerated people. This is a recurring trope across the franchise, which routinely presents the televised experiment as a learning process for “at-risk” cast members of color. Constituting incarceration as a matter of poor choices disavows the systematic surveillance and criminalization of impoverished populations and communities of color, and produces incarcerated subjects as both permanently risky and incapable of self-governance.

The faux prisoners who are not attempting to turn their experience on the show into a career opportunity sometimes state a desire to reform U.S. mass incarceration and the predatory mode of governing upon which it is based. No one on the show is arguing to abolish prisons – instead, they are focused on making prisons a bit more humane, but simultaneously more controlled and effective. The televised experiment is staged to *reform* jails, and, in turn, incarceration more broadly. However, some participants have their own reasons for voluntarily sacrificing their freedom to experience imprisonment first hand. As with most reality shows, these ethics clash as the participants are pitted against each other. In the opening trailer, a white, 30-something male participant likens prison to a country club and claims the system is too soft. During season 5, a white woman who describes herself as “right-wing conservative” tells the camera: “These are horrible, evil people. Our prison system compared to the rest of the world is cake.” Other volunteers feel sorry for the prisoners and want to find a way to help them. On every iteration of the series, at least one participant of color has articulated a critical view of prison, citing the racialization of mass incarceration, the warehousing of prisoners, and the lack of resources for prisoners to rehabilitate as motivations for “going inside.” In the first season, this perspective is articulated by Maryum Ali, an African American social worker in gang prevention and the daughter of Muhammad Ali, who goes undercover to expose injustices within the criminal justice system. In the end, however, these plot lines emphasize the culture shock and emotional journeys of the volunteer participants much more than the power dynamics of mass incarceration.

Conclusion

Prison-themed reality television is a market-based cultural phenomenon, a platform for new forms of prison entrepreneurialism, and a technology for dividing those who govern themselves through freedom and the growing number of “exceptions” who are punished and controlled by other means. At the same time, *60 Days In* is rationalized as a reformist project, an opportunity to “expose issues that have been plaguing” the correctional facilities on screen and “gain a deeper understanding of the criminal justice system,” according to the show’s opening sequence. Television and affiliated social media are stitched into the need to constantly monitor the prison, to make it better. This sense of purpose connects the series to the reformist history of documentary to the extent that it asks TV viewers to understand incarceration as a potential problem that the TV industry is uniquely positioned to solve. While footage of shackled people, filthy facilities, and people sleeping on floors can

be interpreted as a visual cataloguing of human rights violations, the casting and narrative, as we have shown, works against this interpretation. The dominant rationale for reform comes from prison officials, who cite illegal drug use, smuggling, and gangs as problems that are solvable with intel from the volunteers and the intensified monitoring systems put in place for the show. In the first episode, Sheriff Noel explains, “I felt I needed to see things from another perspective. But it’s almost impossible to get an unbiased look at what’s working and what’s not. What I need is ordinary people that have never committed a crime to live in my facility for two months.” The minor reform of certain prison procedures and the firing of some prison guards due to violations caught on tape at the end of the season reiterates the need for intensified surveillance and control, which the series helped implement through its provision of new cameras and other resources.

In this sense, *60 Days* ultimately suggests that television – not society, policy, activists, or incarcerated people themselves – plays a primary role in both the operability of the prison and its reform, through its experiments, expanded surveillance, confessionals, and multi-platform discussion platforms. Prison TV does not misrepresent or distort the realities of the prison; it helps to constitute the widening inequalities, racial formations, and precarities of neoliberalism, including mass incarceration. Reality television and its social media extensions have been thoroughly integrated into the operations of the prison-industrial complex – so much so that we coined a new term to conceptualize this shift. Increasingly, the prison adopts the logic of the culture industry, and the TV industry operates as a racialized technology of predatory governmentality. This phenomenon, we argue, takes on critical urgency as the melding of carceral logics, media culture, and racialized and classed governance produces new modes of discipline and control.

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Notes

1. The culture industries’ entanglement with the state – especially the military – is not new. The film industry collaborated with the United States government during the First and Second World Wars, producing propaganda to rationalize and assist war efforts and, in so doing, shaped the medium as well. The videogame industry and the military are deeply intertwined in their development of technologies that serve as military training tools as well as popular entertainment. See for example Heidi Wasson and Lee Grieveson (eds), *Cinema’s Military Industrial Complex* (2018) and Roger Stahl’s *Militainment* (2009). This has intensified in the digital age, with the use of AI, drones, and an expanded surveillance culture tied to policing and the FBI. Kelly Gates (2016) has examined, for example, how police departments’ increasing reliance on media technologies has made police work into a type of media and cultural labor, one that shores up the authority and legitimization of police.
2. The term prison-industrial complex was first used by the social theorist Mike Davis in 1995 to describe the rapidly expanding business of prisons in California that began to rival agriculture as a key industry for the state. Activists and scholars have extended his analysis to theorize the “interlocking economic and political forces,” including the War on Drugs and institutionalized racism, that collude to confine and imprison more than 2 million people in the United States (see Davis, 1995; see also Davis A, 2003; Sudbury, 2010: 18).

3. Additional series include *24 to Life* (Lifetime, 2016); *Prison Wives Club* (Lifetime, 2014); and *Babies Behind Bars* (Lifetime, 2016). For more on law enforcement reality TV, see Ouellette (2011).
4. For prison abolitionists, any form of incarceration is considered extreme. Similarly, the modifier “mass” in “mass incarceration” presumes that there is an appropriate amount of incarceration.
5. Along with *60 Days In*, A&E’s programming line-up includes *Life PD*, which features “live” coverage of policing across the United States (and its spin-off, *Live PD: Police Patrol*), and a new twist on *60 Days In* called *60 Days In: Narcoland*, focusing on drug cartels.
6. *60 Days In*, “Unusual Suspects,” March 10, 2016.
7. *60 Days In*, “First Timers,” March 10, 2016.
8. See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/prison-labor-in-america/406177/>.
9. See Herivel and Wright, *Prison Profiteers: Who Makes Money from Mass Incarceration?* (2007); James, *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons* (2000); Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (1999); see also Wang (2018) and Alexander (2012).
10. See: “Bexel providing all robotic camera systems,” <https://bexel.com/news/bexel-providing-robotic-camera-systems-associated-equipment-hit-ae-docuseries-60-days/> (accessed 26 March 2019).
11. See: <https://www.whas11.com/video/news/local/indiana/clark-co-sheriffs-office-spoofs-60-days-in-with-tater-tots/417-2168536> (accessed 26 March 2019).
12. A&E, “60 Days In: Prison Hacks,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3f6ahSs-b4>. See also, Mark Abadi, “In jail, prisoners use life hacks on ‘60 Days In,’” (2018).
13. See: <https://www.aetv.com/shows/60-days-in/playlist/60-days-in-from-inmate-to-officer>.
14. For earlier histories of television’s relationship to governing see Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You? How Public TV Failed the People* (2002) and Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (2010).
15. The Sentencing Project, “Criminal Justice Facts,” <http://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/> (accessed 26 March 2018).

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