



Book Review

Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty (2023) *Ghosts Over the Boiler: Voices from Alabama's Death Row*. Katie Owens-Murphy (Ed.). Vanderbilt University Press

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Ghosts Over the Boiler: Voices from Alabama's Death Row is a collection of essays and poems written by condemned prisoners over a 30-year period (1990-2020). It is a haunting record of life and death in the belly of a special kind of beast—Alabama's death row. The title of the book comes from the title of a poem written by Darrell B. Grayson a few years before he was executed in 2007. The poem—and the book—convey a jarring sense of perseverance in the face of extermination, like a flower sprouting from concrete under the shadow of a boot. Grayson's writing is mesmerizing: Preacher has hung himself because his cell over the boiler is too hot, like a corner of hell; prison staff are wraithlike figures behaving casually (smoking, leaning, chatting) while they remove Preacher's body; the author is a 'flunky' mopping the floor outside death row's cells, discussing inevitability with comrades; like Preacher, everyone on death row is a ghost over the boiler. Like Darrell Grayson, many of the writers in *Ghosts Over the Boiler* have been executed.

The majority of the material in the book comes from the newsletter, *On Wings of Hope*, which has been published since 1990 by members of Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty (PHADP), the organization created and run by Alabama death row inmates. The book begins with an interview by Katie Owens-Murphy, an Associate Professor of English at the University of North Alabama, with some of its authors. One of Bart Johnson's contributions to this conversation is a description of vigils during the week of an execution, revealing PHADP's sense of community:

And one of the things that we do in our vigil here, if they allow us to walk on the week of the execution: we will go outside, refrain from yard activity—no basketball game or exercising that we normally would do—pressed whites, purple ribbons in solidarity for the person that has the [execution] date, and we will have a prayer service, praying for everyone involved, even the people having to deal with this as a part of their job. (p. 28)

Death row solidarity is a major theme of the book, expressed not only with vivid demonstrations, such as the vigils described above, but also through concrete transformative actions taken by PHADP members (e.g., writing articles for *On Wings of Hope* regularly, mentoring junior members). Jeffery Rieber conceives of these actions as forms of resistance against the gray zone of prison culture, explaining the power of 'personal growth' and 'trying to grow as a man' together with fellows (p. 185). As Randy Lewis describes, when men arrive at death row in Alabama, PHADP provides direct material assistance: 'When any guy



gets here, we send them a care package. You've got some guys in PHADP who will look out for the individual until that individual is able to have financial resources to come in' (p. 37). Throughout the collection, writers express the importance of a deep bond they share as condemned persons.

The first words in the first issue of *On Wings of Hope* expressed PHADP's *raison d'être*—to fulfill the promise of Thurgood Marshall's hypothesis that support for the death penalty would decrease as knowledge of it would increase: '*On Wings of Hope* is a publication of Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty. We are hoping that you, the reader, will try to find an understanding of the death penalty in America today' (p. 43). The authors of the newsletter try to achieve this by speaking truth to power in a way that only they can, explaining the significance of known problems with the death penalty—racism, wrongful convictions, botched executions, failure-to-deliver a social good—to *them*. For example, the concept of 'closure' has not been examined thoroughly by scholars of capital punishment, probably because it is hard to define and measure in academic terms. By contrast, Timothy Scott Cothren's argument that 'closure' is a false promise exploited by death penalty proponents (pp. 62-63) is incisive because it is personal, real. Likewise, Jeffrey Lee's critique of arbitrary and *ad hoc* execution protocols and the botches that came with them in the second decade of the twenty-first century reflects concepts developed by academics such as Deborah Denno and Austin Sarat, but in a concise, powerful voice rather than in a scholarly style: 'The new lethal injection protocols amount to states using human beings as guinea pigs. As more states scramble to come up with different ways to execute someone, the risk of pain and suffering continues to go up' (p. 267).

While the authors' candid descriptions of the death penalty's failures deliver a direct abolitionist argument, PHADP members' writings on race reflect the complex dynamics caused by politics, crime, the criminal legal system, and prison. The case of Henry Hays provides us with an example. Hays was a member of the Ku Klux Klan sent to Alabama's death row for murdering a young Black man in Mobile in one of the last known lynchings in the United States. Hays claimed he was innocent of the crime, and a reprint of a short article he wrote before being executed in 1997 (titled 'Will I be Remembered?') makes no explicit mention of race or his own racist history, although it does mention his friendship with Alabama death row exoneree Walter McMillian, who was Black (p. 47). An editor's note on Hays accompanying the reprint explains that Hays was welcomed to the row by Black members of PHADP and that Hays joined the group and repudiated his racism (p. 47). After subsequent executions of two Black men (in 1999), Grayson, editor at the time of *On Wings of Hope*, writes with searing clarity about the danger of celebrating the execution of a Klan member:

Many will recall my admonition on conduct when some were televised cheering at the murder-by-execution of ex-Klansman and PHADP member Henry Hays. I said this behavior would come back to haunt us, because the treatment that Henry received from the courts, unjust as it was, served the purpose to solidify the state's posture to murder "mothers' brown babies," not to give justice for the victim's family. I hate to say I told you so, but here you have it in the murders of Victor and Brian, and the same will hold true for more of us to come. (p. 52)

Black men on death row welcoming a member of the Ku Klux Klan into their movement is the kind of radical forgiveness that reminds one of that flower sprouting from concrete—only to be smashed by the state's boot a little later. It is haunting.

Ghosts Over the Boiler is also an archive of DIY craftsmanship. Anthony Boyd's explanation of creating the hard copy of *On Wings of Hope*, taken from Editor Katie Owens-Murphy's interview in 2019, evokes zine or samizdat publishing from decades before:

I do the cutting and the pasting on the newsletter . . . I use Elmer's glue, put it back on the articles, glue them in, glue all of the ornaments and the vines in, glue in the officers' [names]; then when it's all glued and put together . . . we send it to Esther, and she takes it to the printer, and the printer prints it off from there. I've got a ruler and a razor blade, and the back of a legal pad, you know the hard part—the brown part—that I do the cutting on with a little razor blade and a ruler to make sure I'm cutting the line straight, and that's how it's done. (p. 29)

Descriptions like this, along with reproduced photos, drawings, ephemera—including the handwritten original manuscript of the title poem—give a glimpse of how men practice micro-resistance on one of America's worst death rows. This is sad scene, to be sure, but one that contains hope.

If one were to criticize this book, it might be that it lacks a cohesive narrative and it does not include critical engagement with its own material. The strength of *Ghosts Over the Boiler* is that it is a record, an archive, a collection of intensely meaningful texts that reveal much about human life in one of the true hellholes of American society. Its weakness is that it begs for coherency. The authors in this collection are brilliant, but the collection might be more engaging with contextualization. Full throated scholarly analysis is not necessary—and would probably detract from the book—but a bit more about the process of curation would make it feel more complete.

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Reference

Grayson DB (2005) 'Ghosts over the boiler' in *Poetry 2021* (originally published in *Against Time*, Mercy Seat Press). <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/155223/ghosts-over-the-boiler>.