

From Slave Ship to Supermax: The Prisoner Abuse Narrative in Contemporary  
African American Fiction

by

Patrick Elliot Alexander

Department of English  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Maurice Wallace, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Priscilla Wald

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ian Baucom

\_\_\_\_\_  
Wahneema Lubiano

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tara T. Green

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of  
English in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2012

ABSTRACT

From Slave Ship to Supermax: The Prisoner Abuse Narrative in Contemporary  
African American Fiction

by

Patrick Elliot Alexander

Department of English  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Maurice Wallace, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Priscilla Wald

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ian Baucom

\_\_\_\_\_  
Wahneema Lubiano

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tara T. Green

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of  
English in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2012

Copyright by  
Patrick Elliot Alexander  
2012

## **Abstract**

Responding to African American literary criticism's recent engagements with contemporary U.S. imprisonment, *From Slave Ship to Supermax* traces the development of a heretofore un-theorized tradition in African American literature in which fiction writers bring to light the voice, critical thinking, and literary production of actual prisoner abuse survivors. This dissertation treats novelists James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, and Ernest Gaines as the contemporary prison's literary intermediaries, as writers whose fictional narratives of jailhouse beatings, rape and wounding on slave ships, and state-sponsored execution are inspired and haunted by the critically-unexamined abuse stories of late-twentieth century prisoners. Drawing from the field of African American literary theory, political prisoners' writings, as well as prisoners' low-circulating zines, journals, and pamphlets, I argue that the production and distribution of abuse narratives by African American fiction's captive characters illuminate the clandestine and insurgent literary practices of actual abused prisoners. This revelatory work accomplished by Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines demonstrates the radical utility of African American fiction at a moment in which prisoner abuse is widespread, underrepresented, and rarely documented in a way that affords the abused prisoner any measure of authorial control. In contradistinction to the victimization narratives that typify mainstream prisoner abuse stories, stories which appear in the human rights literature of advocacy organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, this dissertation concludes that contemporary African American novelists emphasize the authorial control of abused captives and thus make apparent the rich complexities of their interior lives and the way in which the repressive spaces to which

they are confined are also generative sites for reimagining the self and community.

## **Dedication**

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to every imprisoned man who I have been blessed to teach and fellowship with at Orange Correctional Center in Hillsborough, North Carolina...you never cease to bring to my memory Hebrews 13:3, a Scripture that has fueled the writing of this dissertation: *Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies.*

## Contents

Abstract.....	iv
List of Illustrations.....	ix
Acknowledgements.....	x
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Talking in George Jackson’s Shadow: The Voice of the Imprisoned Intellectual in Baldwin’s <i>If Beale Street Could Talk</i> .....	35
An Introduction to Baldwin’s Prisoner Abuse Narrative.....	37
Baldwin’s Witness of Abused Political Prisoner George Jackson.....	43
Jackson’s Slave Metaphor & the Abused Political Prisoner as Slave in <i>If Beale Street Could Talk</i> .....	51
Conclusion.....	69
Chapter 2: “Unspeakable Thoughts, Unspoken”: Morrison’s <i>Beloved</i> and Testimony of Women Prisoners’ Abuse.....	75
The Contemporary U.S. Women’s Prison: A Reinstatement of the Slave Ship Social Order.....	80
<i>Beloved</i> & Prisoner Abuse Testimony.....	88
Conclusion.....	112
Chapter 3: From Slave Ship to Supermax: Johnson’s <i>Middle Passage</i> , Suspensions of “Civilized Law,” and Evidentiary Abuse Testimony.....	116
Suspensions of “Civilized Law”: The Contemporary High-Security Prison & the Reinstatement of the Slave Ship Social Order.....	119
The New Slave Ship & Evidentiary Abuse Testimony.....	136
Conclusion: <i>Middle Passage</i> & Evidentiary Abuse Testimony.....	144
Chapter 4: “With his pencil and notebook, he tries to define his humanity”: The Voice of the Death Row Prisoner in Gaines’s <i>A Lesson Before Dying</i> .....	148
An Introduction to Gaines’s Prisoner Abuse Narrative.....	149

<i>A Lesson</i> as Gaines's Pained Witness of Death Row Prisoners.....	157
<i>A Lesson's</i> Revivifying Prisoner Abuse Narrative and Its Shadow.....	167
Conclusion.....	197
Bibliography.....	203
Biography.....	217

## **List of Illustrations**

Allen, Bill. Willie Francis, Death Row. *Associated Press Photo Archive* 4 May 1946.

## **Acknowledgments**

Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Without faith, it is impossible to effect radical social transformation, imagine alternatives to mass incarceration, establish a world where all people are free to affirm their humanity—and, without faith, it is impossible to complete a dissertation. I am forever indebted to those people who had faith in the value of this project and in my timely completion of it.

Maurice Wallace, thank you for being this project’s breathtakingly visionary advisor. In addition to your extended, instructive comments on the many versions of chapters you received from me, your unswerving belief that my research and prison activism need not be mutually exclusive really helped me to achieve the synergy necessary to write the dissertation I was actually supposed to write. Thank you for expressing such radical faith, and for exercising it by teaching African American literature with me behind bars. More than anyone else, you “ministered” to me during this dissertation-writing season of my life. You helped me to visualize and follow the nontraditional critical routes that, in turn, led me to write the more intellectually adventurous dissertation I ultimately needed to write. You are truly an inspiration.

I am equally grateful to my committed committee members and readers, Priscilla Wald, Ian Baucom, Wahneema Lubiano, Tara Green, Fred Moten, and Sharon Patricia Holland, for posing provocative questions on various chapters. Each of you, exuding your distinctive brilliance, engaged with me at the level of ideas without neglecting those sentence-level issues for which even lifelong English majors require a refreshing. I am especially appreciative to you for helping me to believe that this project’s ambitious

critical reach was within my reach—if I was willing to stretch beyond my scholarly comfort zone. Thank you, in other words, for pushing me beyond that edge. I needed it.

Dylan Rodríguez, Vikki Law, Nina Billone Prieur, and Ashley Lucas: thank you for being you and for being there for me throughout some particularly trying moments during the early phases of this journey. Though we have shared many conversations, I have probably not expressed enough how grateful I am for the model that you provided and continue to provide not only as prison studies scholar-activists, but also as genuine mentors. I don't know how you found the time or energy to review and respond to my chapters so generously, but your relentless sacrifice alone gave me the courage to come back to the page, and when necessary, take the disciplinary limits off my thinking so I could write that particular dissertation that was pleading “write *me!*”

Vikki, I extend an additional thanks to you for getting me hip to *Tenacious*, the amazing incarcerated women's zine for which you serve as co-editor. Thanks also to Eric Frazier at the U.S. Library of Congress for directing me to the 1947 pamphlet written by death row prisoner Willie Francis, *My Trip to the Chair*. I would not have a convincing final chapter to this dissertation without you making the effort you did to secure this rare document for me.

I am ever grateful to the benefactors of the Katherine Goodman Stern Fellowship, the Franklin Humanities Institute Dissertation Fellowship, and the Graduate School Summer Research Fellowship. Without your financial support, I simply would not have had the time, space, and intellectual energy that this project demanded of me.

Thank you Reggie Patterson for Sunday brunch conversations that were relaxing and intellectually rigorous at one and the same time: you have no idea how much you

have helped me to keep the faith. Thank you Christina Chia, June Hee Kwon, Eric Brandom, Liz Shesko, SherAli Tareen, and Youngmi Cho, for your impressive interdisciplinary critique: without it, I never would have believed that I had the chance to reach audiences outside of my field.

To Mom and Dad: I love you both so much and value every prayer prayed, word of wisdom imparted, and encouraging phone call made. Your lives testify that true faith is demonstrated by choosing to smile and persevere during what seems to be the most isolating, unproductive, and chaotic seasons in one's life. Thanks immensely.

To Mike and Nolan (of the Alexander Big 3): I couldn't ask for a more dedicated support squad. Thank you for the laughing and lifting breaks, and for those uplifting e-mails and text messages you've sent at just the right moment. You are definitely two brothers who are on the move, but in all of your moving and shaking, you haven't forgotten how to be genuinely supportive brothers. Whether you were hard at work on a college degree or your own dissertation, you have, through regular conversations and role-modeling, spurred me onward with the writing of every single chapter.

To my best friend, Marques Richeson, and to your wife Tamika: I am grateful for all of the encouragement visits and morale boosting. You are both pioneering scholars in your own right, and yet, some kind of way, you made time to check in on me even when you were pressed for time. Thank you. Your authentic investment in my progress on the dissertation, and in my peace of mind while I was writing it, has made a lasting impression on me. You are true friends.

To my ironmen, Charles Freeman, Angel Gallardo, and Shaun Saunders: thank you for your belief in the power of prayer and for keeping me lifted during some of the

most difficult phases of the writing. You helped me to maintain a spiritual perspective and keep my eyes on the only One who could ceaselessly renew my intellectual stamina.

Lloyd Garrison, thank you for being my first scholar-activist role model. As a young African American man who openly loves reading and regularly taps into literature's transformative potential inside and outside of the academy, your life constantly reminded me to me that writing this particular dissertation was not optional.

Thanks also to Wallis Baxter, Miles Parker Grier, Ashon Crawley, Cynthia Greenlee-Donnell, Lorien Olive, Sarah Higginbotham, Michael Stanton, A.J. Rice, Solomon Burnette, Mary and Gabe DesHarnais, Jan Dodds, Alice Denson, Joy Turner, Soji Sajuyigbe, the undergraduate students in my "Prison and the Literary Imagination" course at Duke, the Equipped Young Adult Ministry of Union Baptist Church, and so many others who have helped me to believe that I could write a dissertation that would speak to the many communities to which I am accountable.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the inquisitive students I have been blessed to teach at Orange Correctional Center, and to the infectiously exploratory Allison Curseen, my friend and fellow prison-teaching colleague in Duke's Department of English. Believe it or not, you were the ones who were truly with me in this dissertation's trenches. While reading James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Ernest Gaines behind the razor wire, your intellectual curiosities inspired so many of my own. If it were not for your remarkable close readings, I never would have asked myself questions like: what does imprisonment look like in contemporary African American fiction? How attuned are African American novelists to issues affecting the imprisoned, such as political repression, racial bias, and prisoner abuse? How do the narrative techniques of

Baldwin, Morrison, and Gaines offer us new approaches to conceptualizing abuse behind bars? Thank you for challenging me, sweating with me, hearing me out, and reminding me, week in and week out, of the urgency surrounding my writing of this particular dissertation. You all mean more to me than I could ever adequately express in words.

## Introduction: Abused Captives and the African American Literary Imagination

The [prison] farm I was on, down yonder. They used to beat me. With whips. With rifle butts. It made them feel good to beat us; I can see their faces now. There would always be two or three of them...the ringleader had red hair, his name was Martin Howell. Big, dumb Irishman, sometimes he used to make the colored guys beat each other. And he'd stand there, watching, with his lips dropping, his lips wet, laughing, until the poor guy dropped to the ground.

—Caleb, prisoner abuse survivor from James Baldwin's novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*<sup>1</sup>

The jailhouse door opened and the earlier demonstrators came wearily out, their faces misshapen from swellings and discolored from bruises. Truman limped along with the rest, moving in great pain and steadily muttering curses as the line of troopers hurried them relentlessly out of the square...As soon as this line was out of sight, the troopers turned on [the next group of demonstrators], beating and swinging with their bludgeons. One blow knocked Meridian to the ground...within minutes [she and] they had been beaten inside [the jail].

—Meridian, prisoner abuse survivor from Alice Walker's novel *Meridian*<sup>2</sup>

All forty-six men [on the chain gang] woke to rifle shot. All forty-six. Three whitemen walked along the trench unlocking the doors one by one. And one by one, the blackmen emerged...Chain-up completed, they knelt down. Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular—or none—or all.

—Unnamed witness of prisoner abuse from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*<sup>3</sup>

Dachau [was] a labor camp...I saw men working harder than anyone I ever saw working on a chain gang. I started to shake. I couldn't help myself...[but] a prisoner who let anger show got the crap beat out of him—and that was the mildest punishment!

—Clifford, prisoner abuse survivor from John Williams's novel *Clifford's Blues*<sup>4</sup>

Since the 1960s, the rapid expansion of the U.S. prison system has been accompanied by increased reports of prisoner abuse, and authors of African American literature have taken notice. Contemporary African American novelists' critically-

---

<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (New York: Dial Press, 1968): 231-232.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1976): 84.

<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 107.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Williams, *Clifford's Blues* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1999): 14, 15, 247.

unexamined attention to the routine abusive treatment of incarcerated persons is, in fact, both this introduction's point of departure and the primary focus of the chapters that follow. As evident from just the works referenced in the epigraphs above, not only do depictions of black prisoners' exploitation by policemen, prison guards, chain gang officers, and military soldiers figure prominently in African American fiction works of the past half-century, but these depictions also reveal literature's longstanding engagement with a politics of incarceration typified by the hyperpunitive, racialized, and privatized confinement of allegedly disposable people, and the disciplinary wounding of such captive bodies.<sup>5</sup>

Situated in the historical context of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, works published by James Baldwin and Alice Walker in the 1960s and 70s call to mind the jail and prison beatings of black political activists like Marion King, June E. Johnson, Annell Ponder, Fannie Lou Hamer, Eleanor Holmes, Lawrence Guyot, and George Jackson—racial justice advocates whose acts of protest were interpreted by white policemen and prison guards as transgressions not only of segregation law, but also of their unspoken racial authority.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in Baldwin's 1965 short story "Going to

---

<sup>5</sup> For details on this rise in reports of prisoner abuse in U.S. prisons since 1970, please see the following: Human Rights Watch, "Prisoner Abuse: How Different Are U.S. Prisons?" 13 May 2004, 16 December 2011 <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2004/05/13/prisoner-abuse-how-different-are-us-prisons>>; Alan Elsner, *Gates of Injustice: The Crisis in American Prisons* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006); Colin Dayan, *The Story of Cruel and Unusual* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007); Silja J.A. Talvi, *Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007); Anne-Marie Cusac, *Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010): 157-159, 161; Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Touchstone, 2001): 260-263; Joy James, *Warfare in the Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 21.

Meet the Man,” a white sheriff who is initially aggravated by hearing a wounded black activist’s freedom songs enters his cell with a cattle prod, and repeatedly strikes his genitals with “peculiar excitement.”<sup>7</sup> This activist’s fate redoubles in the sufferings of Caleb Proudhammer and Fonny Hunt, falsely-convicted black men in Baldwin’s later novels *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* who white prison guards isolate and habitually beat as a consequence of their resistance to racial humiliation.

In Alice Walker’s 1976 novel *Meridian*, black college students Meridian Hill and Truman Held number among the assertive but unarmed demonstrators who state troopers club and maim behind bars. Walker, who has also written the foreword for a book authored by famed black political prisoner and international cause célèbre Mumia Abu-Jamal, is uncomfortably attentive to the agony that her novel’s protagonist experiences in a Southern jail: “When the sheriff grabbed [Meridian] by the hair and someone else began punching her and kicking her in the back, she did not even scream.”<sup>8</sup> Baldwin and Walker clearly refuse to depict prisoner abuse as an aberration; for them, prisoner mistreatment is routinized racial punishment aimed at neutralizing the black revolutionary’s political praxis. Baldwin and Walker’s conception of prisoner abuse as an ordinary rather than exceptional aspect of the terrain of punishment is central to how I view and discuss the experiences of abused captives in this dissertation.

---

<sup>7</sup> James Baldwin, *Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1998): 936.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1976): 84. Walker wrote a foreword for Abu-Jamal’s *All Things Censored*, which was published by Seven Stories Press in 2000.

To return to the epigraphs that open this introduction, though, it's worth noting that while Toni Morrison and John A. Williams also represent prisoner abuse as a systemic practice, for them, the torment of state captives is unprovoked racial degradation that is seemingly set in a bygone era—in a time and place removed from the contemporary moment in which they write. In Morrison's acclaimed 1987 novel *Beloved*, for instance, a group of non-confrontational black male convicts labor in a nineteenth-century chain gang camp, where they are caged in filthy underground boxes "five feet deep, five feet wide" and forced to perform fellatio on white guards at gunpoint.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, the treatment of these black men would seem to be too brutal to have relevance to a contemporary epoch in which most Americans vehemently protest even the mention of "cruel and unusual punishment" in U.S. war prisons. Such cruelty would seem possible only in the Reconstruction-era American South that Morrison's novel most obviously depicts. But, as literary critic Dennis Childs has recently pointed out, the sexual victimization and inhuman containment of Paul D and the 45 other black men in *Beloved's* chain gang actually reflect a "forward-haunting"—an unsettling allusion to methods of racialized prisoner degradation encountered by contemporary U.S. prisoners (disproportionately, black men) who, since the 1980s, have often been warehoused in six-by-eight-foot Security Housing Units (SHUs) for 23 ½ hours a day.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the resurgence of chain gangs in Alabama and Arizona in the 1990s and early 2000s—a penal practice that legal scholars and human rights groups

---

<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 106.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis Childs, "'You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet': *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix," *The American Quarterly* 61.2 (2009): 271-297.

condemned as anachronistic racial exploitation in a post-Civil Rights era—serves as yet another reminder of *Beloved*'s disturbing contemporaneity.<sup>11</sup>

Quite similarly, Williams's 1999 novel *Clifford's Blues*, though inspired by Williams viewing a photo of two black prisoners in a Dachau museum, depicts black men's lives in German concentration camps during the 1930s and 40s in ways that both honor and extend beyond the author's expressed intention to "enlarge and personalize the events of that time."<sup>12</sup> More to the point, the militaristic aggression that Williams's fictionalized SS soldiers practice on the bodies of black detainees finds eerie resonance in more contemporary scenes of racialized prisoner abuse that have taken place in privatized facilities, like Texas's Brazoria Detention Center. There, in September 1996, guards unleashed electronic stun guns, cattle prods, and police dogs on scores of unarmed black male prisoners when "a guard allegedly smelled marijuana in the jail."<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary African American fiction works are thus replete with images of captive black bodies that are wounded secretly, violated repeatedly, and—to call to mind Ernest Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying*—executed spectacularly. A wealth of characters in late-twentieth century African American novels confront unchecked physical violence, routinized sexual exploitation, and premature death in violent social orders that either are prisons or emblemize the racial-capitalist regimes informed by the disciplining strategies of the modern penitentiary. Prisoner abuse, that is to say, is not

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Tessa M. Gorman, "Back on the Chain Gang: Why the Eighth Amendment and the History of Slavery Proscribe the Resurgence of Chain Gangs," *California Law Review* 85.2 (1997): 441-478; Dan Pens and Paul Wright, "The Resurgence of Chain Gangs," *The Celling of America: An Inside Look at the U.S. Prison Industry* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998): 70-77.

<sup>12</sup> For more, please visit <<http://www.coffeehousepress.org/1999/03/clifford%E2%80%99s-blues/>>.

<sup>13</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003): 97.

only represented in the jails of Baldwin and Walkers' fiction works, or in the early and late twentieth-century detention sites that haunt the novelistic prose of Morrison and Williams. Though prisoner abuse is commonly pictured in the national imagination as the deliberate mistreatment of convicted criminals, illegal immigrants, prisoners of war, or "enemy combatants" by prison guards or military soldiers, in the African American literary imagination of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, prisoner abuse takes place within jails and prisons, on the street corners of police states, and on slave ships—in any authoritarian regime where physical mobility is regulated hierarchically and the subordinated are subjected to unchecked bodily torment and premodern forms of exemplary punishment.<sup>14</sup> This dissertation investigates the infliction of pain on captive characters in these repressive sites. In the chapters that follow, I argue that contemporary African American fiction's prisoners, slaves, and police violence victims produce abuse narratives whose radical content and form can help us to reconceptualize mainstream stories of prisoner abuse.

Responding to African American literary criticism's recent engagements with contemporary U.S. imprisonment, this dissertation, *From Slave Ship to Supermax: The Prisoner Abuse Narrative in Contemporary African American Fiction*, traces the development of a heretofore un-theorized tradition in African American literature in which fiction writers bring to light the voice, critical thinking, and literary production of actual prisoner abuse survivors. This dissertation treats novelists James Baldwin, Toni

---

<sup>14</sup> A term popularized by the George H.W. Bush administration, "enemy combatant" was a state-backed designation that permitted the United States to confine suspected terrorists to war prisons and secret detention sites at length without criminal charges. The Obama administration reversed this policy in 2009. Terry Frieden, "U.S. reverse policy; drops 'enemy combatant' term," 13 March 2009, 16 December 2011 <<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/13/enemy.combatant/index.html>>.

Morrison, Charles Johnson, and Ernest Gaines as the contemporary prison's literary intermediaries, as writers whose fictional narratives of jailhouse beatings, rape and wounding on slave ships, and state-sponsored execution are inspired and haunted by the critically-unexamined abuse stories of late-twentieth century prisoners. Drawing from the field of African American literary theory, political prisoners' writings, as well as prisoners' low-circulating zines, journals, and pamphlets, I argue that the production and distribution of abuse narratives by African American fiction's captive characters illuminate the clandestine and insurgent literary practices of actual abused prisoners. This revelatory work accomplished by Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines demonstrates the radical utility of African American fiction at a moment in which prisoner abuse is widespread, underrepresented, and rarely documented in a way that affords the abused prisoner any measure of authorial control. In contradistinction to the victimization narratives that typify mainstream prisoner abuse stories, stories which appear in the human rights literature of advocacy organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, this dissertation concludes that contemporary African American novelists emphasize the authorial control of abused captives and thus make apparent the rich complexities of their interior lives and the ways in which the repressive spaces to which they are confined are also generative sites for reimagining the self and community.

Throughout the dissertation, I make the case that both the content and form of abuse narratives in Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), and Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) offer us ways of conceptualizing anew the voice, critical thinking, and literary practices

of actual abused prisoners. Again, the most widely-circulated prisoner abuse narratives emerge in human rights reports (i.e., those published by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Just Detention International) and in scholarly discourse in the field of critical prison studies. These mainstream prisoner abuse narratives tend to shock and awe because they emphasize the harrowing reality of prisoner abuse over the subjectivity of abuse survivors. In their attempt to establish affective appeal for abused prisoners, human rights reporters generally depict them as victims only, eliding these abuse survivors' critical interpretations of their mistreatment. These reporters, in other words, ironically reinforce prisoners' nonhumanity/subhumanity even as they insist on and appeal for prisoners' "human rights."

I argue in this dissertation that the tendency of African American fiction writers to position abuse survivors as textual authorities, as critically-engaged thinkers who control both the production and distribution of their abuse narratives, reverses this trend in conventional prisoner abuse storytelling that essentially dispossesses the abuse survivor of voice. Moreover, because narrative production in the aforementioned novels by Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines is framed either by these authors' interactions with actual abused prisoners, or by a practice of conscientious imagining that Morrison calls "literary archaeology," contemporary African American fiction's abused captives—be they the police-victimized residents of an urban ghetto, enslaved African men and women on slave ships, or brutally-beaten convicts in jailhouses—are never depicted as victims only.<sup>15</sup> Rather, as my analyses reveal, Baldwin's and Gaines's falsely-convicted

---

<sup>15</sup> Morrison conceptualizes "literary archaeology" as a sensitive reimagining of an enslaved person's unrecorded interior life. Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: New York Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990): 299-305.

male prisoners, Morrison's sexually-exploited slave ship captives, and Johnson's routinely-wounded male slaves all express ways in which they achieve bodily reclamation and clandestine community even as they acknowledge the regularity and severity of their torment. This dissertation thus posits, above all, that African American fiction's captives craft abuse narratives in ways that invite readers to see abuse sufferers not as victims only, but also as survivors who discover new ways of living and defining their humanity during and after their experiences with routinized abuse.

## Terminology

*Prisoner abuse* is a term that has circulated quite regularly in public discourse in the 2000s in the wake of highly publicized prisoner abuse scandals at U.S. war prisons in Iraq, Guantánomo Bay, Cuba, and Afghanistan. In this dissertation, I in no way take issue with these common conceptions of prisoner abuse, which legal scholars, human rights journalists, and activist-intellectuals in the field of critical prison studies have detailed quite extensively—and quite graphically—over the past two decades. Indebted especially to the groundbreaking legal scholarship of Brenda Smith, Kim Shayo Buchanan, and Colin Dayan, *From Slave Ship to Supermax* takes as its premise the contention that contemporary prisoner abuse is no aberration, but a norm—a covert but often *legally-sanctioned* practice—in U.S. jails, prisons, juvenile detention facilities, and immigration detention centers.<sup>16</sup> In the most fundamental sense, I understand prisoner

---

<sup>16</sup> Brenda V. Smith, “Sexual Abuse of Women in United States Prisons: A Modern Corollary of Slavery,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 33 (2006): 571-608; Kim Shayo Buchanan, “Impunity: Sexual Abuse in Women’s Prisons,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 42 (2007): 45-87; Colin Dayan, *The Story of Cruel and Unusual* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007).

abuse to be the state-supervised mistreatment of persons lawfully and unlawfully jailed, imprisoned, and detained, including the willful physical and psychological exploitation of incarcerated men, women, and youth by corrections officers and facility staff.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, while contemporary prisoner abuse understandably evokes images of U.S. war prisoners who suffer attacks from snarling dogs and sexually-abusive military personnel, or who find themselves hooded, robbed, and “strung with electrical wiring” while standing atop boxes, my dissertation refuses to think about prisoner mistreatment in such an exceptional and allegedly “un-American” manner.<sup>18</sup> I discuss prisoner abuse as a methodical practice that scholars like Dylan Rodríguez, Anne-Marie Cusac, and Caleb Smith rightly argue has long been with us, a practice typified by heinous but “everyday occurrences” exhaustively outlined by the nation’s foremost prison literature scholar, H. Bruce Franklin:

By the end of the twentieth century, when the prison had become a major political weapon of the corporate state, torture designed to dehumanize had become the norm...Gone from the so-called ‘penitentiary’ or ‘correctional facility’ is any pretense of reformation or rehabilitation. *In the typical American prison, degradation, brutalization, and even overt torture are the norm.* Beatings, electric shock, prolonged exposure to heat and even immersion in scalding water, sodomy with riot batons, nightsticks, flashlights, and broom handles, shackled prisoners forced to lie in their own excrement for hours or even days, months of solitary confinement, rape and murder by guards or prisoners instructed by guards—all are everyday occurrences.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Portions of Christian Parenti’s *Lockdown America* are quite instructive for visualizing this base-level definition of prisoner abuse. Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 1999): 170-174, 190-193.

<sup>18</sup> Anne-Marie Cusac, *Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): 248.

<sup>19</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, “The Inside Stories of the Global American Prison,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 50.3 (2008): 236, 238, emphasis mine.

Still, while this dissertation indeed represents a nod to most scholarly conceptions of prisoner abuse, it also aims to complicate the relative ease with which critical discourse has relegated prisoner abuse to the geography of the prison proper. *From Slave Ship to Supermax*, even by way of its title, insists upon investigating prisoner abuse in a historical context inclusive of and inflected by the Middle Passage and racial slavery. Throughout the dissertation, I make the case that one need not be in prison in order to be systematically isolated and abused in ways continuous with the institutional suffering of the contemporary U.S. prisoner or prisoner of war. By drawing attention to the routinized mistreatment of captive subjects in a broader historical context, I show how prisoner abuse is the intentional exploitation, injury, or liquidation of captives by agents of institutional power in *any* authoritarian regime—be it an eighteenth-century slave ship, a nineteenth-century chain gang camp, a twentieth-century COINTELPRO-policed ghetto, or the contemporary women’s prison, where federal law has sanctioned women prisoners’ unsupervised supervision by male guards (and thus legally rendered them vulnerable to the sexual whims of men in power) since 1964.<sup>20</sup> My four chapters thus examine the ways in which late twentieth-century African American novelists’ depictions of captive characters who suffer unchecked physical violence, routinized sexual

---

<sup>20</sup> Brenda V. Smith, “Sexual Abuse of Women in United States Prisons: A Modern Corollary of Slavery,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 33 (2006): 571-608. According to Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, COINTELPRO is an acronym for the FBI Counterintelligence Program which was “designed to destroy individuals and organizations the FBI consider[ed] to be politically objectionable. Tactics included all manner official lying and media disinformation, systematically levying false charges against those targeted, manufacturing evidence to obtain their convictions, withholding evidence which might exonerate them, and occasionally assassinating ‘key leaders.’” Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI’s Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988): xii.

exploitation, and wrongful execution are informed or haunted by the contemporary prison's everyday horror stories.

Moreover, my definition of prisoner abuse as a practice that extends beyond the geography of the detention facility is also indebted to the pioneering scholarship of activist-intellectuals like George Jackson and Dylan Rodríguez.<sup>21</sup> These theorists place contemporary punitive incarceration in a racialized historical context that makes evident the parallels between the disciplinary brutalization of slaves and the regulatory, racialized debilitation of today's prisoners and police violence victims. In this dissertation, I point out that several of the African American fiction writers whose works I examine—James Baldwin and Ernest Gaines, in particular—draw from or signify on these theorists' conceptualizations of prisoner abuse as racialized repression. Indeed, the fiction of Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines helps us to appreciate anew what legal scholar Colin Dayan argues in her work, *The Story of Cruel and Unusual*:

If the methods of punishment used in the United States today—the death penalty, prolonged solitary confinement, extreme force, and psychological torture—seem barbaric by our standards and by those of the rest of the so-called civilized world, this can be traced to the colonial history of the legal stigmatization and deprivation of a group considered less than human... The ghost of slavery still haunts our legal language and holds the prison system in thrall.<sup>22</sup>

*Prisoner abuse narrative* is another term that I use in the dissertation that merits some explanation. On the surface, a claim could be fairly made that *any* prison narrative is an abuse narrative, for, as the acclaimed African American writer John Edgar

---

<sup>21</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970); Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Colin Dayan, *The Story of Cruel and Unusual* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007): 7-8, 16.

Wideman remarks in *Brothers and Keepers*, a memoir that he wrote in collaboration with his imprisoned brother Robby, “keepers run prisons with little or no regard to prisoners’ rights because license to exercise absolute power has been granted by those who rule society.”<sup>23</sup> Wideman, whose brother spent six months confined in a six-by-eight-foot isolation unit for 23 hours a day when guards falsely accused him of an escape attempt, is indeed instructive for helping us grasp how abuse is implicit in the social relations that structure the world behind the razor wire. For Wideman, the convicted criminal is reduced to civil and living death—“a condition of nonexistence”—when s/he enters the penal site, a holding space largely isolated from the intervention of the free world judiciary.<sup>24</sup> In a hierarchized social order that is governed by the whims of nearly-unpunishable prison guards and administrators, and by ambiguous laws—“cruel and unusual punishment” is prohibited by the Eighth Amendment, yet the Thirteenth Amendment effectively reinstates slavery as punishment in the space of the prison—the conditions are always ripe for prisoners’ physical and psychological harm. In Wideman’s words, “Because no one...speaks to the prisoners or for the prisoners, the keepers exercise an incredible power over their charges [...]. The moral and ethical principles that bind society don’t count in prison.”<sup>25</sup>

Wideman’s point notwithstanding, I wholly reject the term “prison narrative” in my dissertation because those literary works classified most commonly as “prison narratives,” “prison writings,” or “prison literature” were not only not conceived of as

---

<sup>23</sup> John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers* (New York: Mariner Books, 2005): 187.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 188, 189.

such by those who authored them, but also might be better understood as “*anti-prison* narratives.” To clarify: following Dylan Rodríguez’s profound assessment of “the problem of prison writing,” I contend that the uncritical categorization of contemporary imprisoned writers’ works as “prison literature classics,” works like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, would likely make Malcolm and George turn over in their graves, and maybe even temporarily abandon them with balled-up fists and indictments more searing than they ever made while they were alive.<sup>26</sup> Malcolm and George’s autobiographical narratives, which depict *but also provocatively and systematically critique* their and other imprisoned men’s experiences behind bars, are nothing short of manifestos against institutionalized racial oppression in the prison proper and the larger U.S. carceral state.<sup>27</sup>

These alleged “prison narratives,” in other words, diverge sharply from a conventional history of American “prison writing” that, as H. Bruce Franklin has shown us, beckons non-imprisoned readers to gaze voyeuristically at the prisoner—either through picaresque confessional narratives in which imprisoned authors plea for understanding or forgiveness for their crimes, sensationalist dramas in which unrepentant convicts glorify violence and crime in the free world and in prison, or unsophisticated conversion narratives in which hardened criminals tell of how penal confinement transforms them into law-abiding (read: unquestioning of state/institutional authority) and

---

<sup>26</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 81-86.

<sup>27</sup> Janet Lyon’s impressive theorization of manifestoes deeply informs my phraseology here. Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

capitalistically-productive citizens.<sup>28</sup> Malcolm and George’s narratives, as with works published by late twentieth-century imprisoned authors Rubin Carter, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Robert Hillary King, are constituted by accounts of prisoners’ systematic victimization behind bars *and* their tactical resistance of such abusive treatment. These works also make evident the ways in which institutionalized racism precedes and predetermines the nature of prisoners’ criminalization, sentencing, incarceration, and (mis)treatment by prison guards and administrators. Drawing very intentionally on legal scholarship, court cases, historical studies of slavery, and the conventions of the slave narrative genre, the autobiographies of Malcolm X, Jackson, Carter, Davis, Shakur, Abu-Jamal, and King all launch radical “anti-prison” critiques—critically-informed analyses of punishment that inspired Joy James’s coining of the term, “contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narratives”:

Contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narratives, such as Abu-Jamal’s *Live from Death Row* or Assata Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography*, can question the very premise of rehabilitation, indicting the state and society and contextualizing or dismissing individual acts of criminality by nonelites, the poor and racialized, to emphasize state criminality or the crimes of elites...Emanat[ing] from the site of the noncitizen, from men and women in cages, regardless of their outlaw and disreputable status, they illuminate past, present, and future possibilities for the reinvention of democracy...These narratives are generally the ‘unauthorized’ versions of political life, often focusing on dissent and policing and repression.<sup>29</sup>

The fictional captives who author and selectively circulate stories of systematized harm, degradation, and debilitation in the works of contemporary African American literature that I examine in this dissertation demonstrate a similar investment in

---

<sup>28</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 124-178.

<sup>29</sup> Joy James, “Introduction: Democracy and Captivity,” *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, ed. Joy James (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005): xxxii.

“illuminat[ing] past, present, and future possibilities for the reinvention of democracy.”

What I term a *prisoner abuse narrative* is a story of unchecked physical violence, routinized sexual exploitation, or state-sponsored execution that fictional slaves, prisoners, or police violence victims compose in oral or written form by situating their encounters with routinized abuse in a framework of large-scale racial repression. In these narratives, abuse-surviving captive characters also emphasize the ways in which they reclaim their bodies, reconstitute their personhood, and establish clandestine community.

Quite related to what James classifies as Abu-Jamal and Shakur’s “contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narratives” or what Rodríguez theorizes as the imprisoned intellectual’s “radical prison praxis,” what I call *prisoner abuse narratives* are radical expressions of voice and critical thought from contemporary African American fiction’s abused captives.<sup>30</sup> These abuse stories attest to characters’ awareness of themselves as political actors, as socially or civilly-dead nonpersons who create and selectively circulate narrative in order to circumvent their systematic silencing and attain a voice.

## **Interventions**

This dissertation represents a contribution to an emerging field in literary criticism that considers how African American confinement literature offers a critical lens through which scholars across the disciplines can reconceptualize issues related to

---

<sup>30</sup> Rodríguez defines “radical prison praxis” as “an active current of political-intellectual work shaped by a condition of direct and unmediated confrontation with technologies of state and state-sanctioned (domestic) warfare.” Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 2. For more on Rodríguez’s “radical prison praxis,” see pp. 104-112 in *Forced Passages*.

contemporary U.S. imprisonment. Specifically, *From Slave Ship to Supermax* builds on recent scholarship that either examines twentieth-century African American literary works on incarceration or places contemporary African American literature in a prison industrial complex context—namely, the work of H. Bruce Franklin, Jon-Christian Suggs, Michael Hames-Garcia, D. Quentin Miller, Brian Conniff, Auli Ek, Jason Haslam, Karla Holloway, Tara T. Green, Peter Caster, Dennis Childs, and Andrew Sargent.<sup>31</sup> The project as a whole might be understood as a response to Green’s interest in opening “new avenues of inquiry into [African American] confinement literature,” especially since it argues for and depends upon interweaving readings of abusive confinement in African American fiction with relevant scholarship in critical prison studies and work on confinement, abjection, and narratology in African American literary theory (recall, for instance, the impressive analyses on voice, confinement, and black bodily suffering offered by Frances Smith Foster, Hortense Spillers, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Debra McDowell, Robyn Wiegman, Saidiya Hartman, and more recently, Carole E. Henderson,

---

<sup>31</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 233-276; Jon-Christian Suggs, “Iron City: Race and Revolutionary Romanticism Behind Bars,” *Legal Studies Forum* 25 (2001): 449-458; Michael Hames-Garcia, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); D. Quentin Miller, “‘On the Outside Looking In’: White Readers of Nonwhite Prison Narratives,” *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005): 15-32; Brian Conniff, “The Prison Writer as Ideologue: George Jackson and the Attica Prison Rebellion,” *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005): 147-173; Auli Ek, *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Jason Haslam, *Fitting Sentences: Identity in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Prison Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Karla Holloway, “A Prison Library” in *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006): 75-89; Tara T. Green, ed., *From Plantation to Prison: African-American Confinement Literature* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008); Peter Caster, *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008): 59-82; Dennis Childs, “You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet”: *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix,” *The American Quarterly*, 61.2 (2009): 271-297; Andrew Sargent, “Representing Prison Rape: Race, Masculinity, and Incarceration in Donald Goines’s *White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief*,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 35.3 (2010): 131-155.

Debra King, and Jennifer Griffiths).<sup>32</sup> More fundamentally, this dissertation makes evident ways in which contemporary prison issues have inspired and shaped the narrative production of some of our best known African American fiction writers.

As mentioned at this introduction's outset, *From Slave Ship to Supermax* also makes a case for the radical utility of African American literary studies in prisoner abuse storytelling and ongoing critical work on prisoner abuse representation. This dissertation fundamentally proposes that abuse narratives crafted by captives in African American literature speak to the dearth of prisoners' perspectives on prison staff misconduct in conventional prisoner abuse stories—stories which generally appear in human rights reports and critical prison studies scholarship and depict abused prisoners as victims only. Put differently, Baldwin's prisoner abuse survivors, Gaines's falsely-convicted protagonist, Morrison's sexually-exploited slave ship captives, and Johnson's wounded male slaves all express a political vernacularity that might be said to amplify the voices of actual abused prisoners. These captive characters' abuse stories and narrative techniques, in fact, allude to abused prisoners' clandestine literary practices. As they

---

<sup>32</sup> Tara T. Green, introduction, *From Plantation to Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*, ed. Tara T. Green (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008): 6; Frances Smith Foster, "'In Respect to Females...': Differences in Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators," *Black Literature Forum* 15.2 (Summer 1981): 66-70; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81; Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 16-37; Deborah E. McDowell, "Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom—*Dessa Rose*," *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, eds. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 144-163; Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 81-113; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Carole E Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002); Debra King, *African Americans and the Culture of Pain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

create and selectively circulate abuse narratives, these characters shine a light on prisoner abuse survivors as authors, as critical thinkers who covertly produce and distribute first-person narratives that tell not only of victimization, but also of bodily reclamation, reconstituted personhood, and clandestine community.

*From Slave Ship to Supermax* also speaks to the necessity of analyzing African American fiction works alongside critical explorations of prisoner abuse in human rights discourse. Works such as Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, for instance, do a superb job of detailing the successes and shortcomings of prisoner abuse representation in human rights reports and political prisoners' memoirs, but fail to consider how *fictional* treatments of prisoner abuse illuminate aspects of abused prisoners' life narratives that the case study, prisoner autobiography, documentary film, or biopic cannot fully bring to light (given their respective genre conventions). For instance, I show throughout this dissertation how contemporary African American fiction's depictions of prisoner abuse, unlike most nonfiction representations of prisoner exploitation, point not to its tragic peculiarity but rather to its *unexceptional* and indeed commonplace nature.

Taken as a whole, then, my analyses of African American novels in this dissertation point not only to the existence but also to the longevity of prisoners' commentary on prisoner abuse. My examinations of imprisoned authors' low-circulating writings on prisoner mistreatment in relation to African American fiction works show how these writings are not only essential to the literary output of a Baldwin, a Morrison, or a Gaines, but also how they constitute a formalized, widespread, but necessarily covert (read: often legally-punishable) literary practice whose radical lineage African American

fiction authors help to elucidate. The overarching structure of this dissertation is thus very much in conversation with a conceptual framework introduced by Sharon Patricia Holland in her brilliant work on black and queer silenced subjects, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and Black Subjectivity*:

We are struck by the brutality just beneath the surface of quotidian life...It is the task of contemporary literary theory to move into marginal space and to converse with those authors who cross boundaries between living and dead, silent and vocal.<sup>33</sup>

The next section of this chapter might be understood as a concentrated look into the far-reaching implications of examining prisoner abuse storytelling in African American literature in a “marginal space” defined by both the profound underrepresentation and misrepresentation of prisoner mistreatment in human rights and academic discourse. Like Holland, it is my contention that the African American literary text affords us an opportunity “to hear the [ostensibly] dead speak in fiction [in order] to discover in culture...opportunities for not only uncovering silences but also transforming inarticulate places into conversational territories.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Prisoner Abuse Storytelling & the Utility of African American Fiction**

The prison system... institutionalizes isolation and secrecy. The prison’s walls are designed not only to keep the prisoners in but to keep the public out, thus preventing observation or knowledge of what is going on inside. Unknowable to all but prisoners and guards, the prison thus becomes a physical site where the most unspeakable torture can continue without any restraint. And as an unknowable place, the prison can thus also

---

<sup>33</sup> Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000): 98.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

become a prime site for cultural fantasy.

—H. Bruce Franklin, “The American Prison and the Normalization of Torture”<sup>35</sup>

The measures taken within the prisons to...keep [prisoners’] stories from public view have become increasingly Draconian. They include...long stints in segregation or the ‘hole,’ harsh restrictions on visits with families, gag orders precluding prisoners talking to the press, and the emergence of supermaximum prisons where everyone is kept in segregation and put under the total control of officers.

—Terry A. Kupers, author, *Prison Madness: The Mental Health Crisis Behind Bars and What We Must Do About It*<sup>36</sup>

I am concerned because the pain in our jails and prisons (and in Abu Ghraib) has mostly occurred in spaces that, in the last several decades, are increasingly isolated and more and more resistant to the eyes of journalists and reformers...Most of us on the outside probably prefer it that way. If it is never easy to imagine another’s pain, it is considerably more difficult to sympathize with the pain of someone who has violated the law and, in some cases, injured or killed another human being. Although pain is, in the early twenty-first century, an important part of American punishment, many of us do not let ourselves know that this is so.

—Anne-Marie Cusac, *Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America*<sup>37</sup>

In the past decade, three widely-referenced studies of the prison industrial complex have revolutionized the way in which contemporary U.S. imprisonment is read. While chronicling the constellation of exploitative social impulses responsible for the recent incarceration epidemic—namely, political repression, corporate greed, and the hyper-policing of the poor and people of color—Christian Parenti’s *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, Angela Y. Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, and Tara Herivel and Paul Wright’s *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America’s Poor* have

---

<sup>35</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, “The American Prison and the Normalization of Torture,” *Torture, American Style*, ed. Margaret Power, May 2006, 16 December 2011  
<<http://www.historiansagainstawar.org/resources/torture/brucefranklin.html>>.

<sup>36</sup> Terry Kupers, introduction, *From the Bottom of the Heap: The Autobiography of Robert Hillary King*, by Robert Hillary King (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009): 17.

<sup>37</sup> Anne-Marie Cusac, *Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): 13, 14.

also accomplished another rare feat: they have earned the unanimous acclaim of the academy.<sup>38</sup> As an anti-prison activist who teaches literature in an increasingly punitive prison system, however, I am most fascinated by the attention these studies pay to stories of prisoner abuse. In an epoch in which the rapid expansion of the U.S. prison system has been accompanied by an upsurge in reports of torture at military prisons abroad and in state and private “correctional” facilities, these studies have gone beyond the mere disclosure of prisoner abuse scandals. Unlike the news media or even the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) committed to human rights advocacy in the American penal terrain, these studies have succeeded in registering the quotidian nature of sexual misconduct in jails and prisons, the frequent racialization of prisoner abuse, and the larger social implications raised by the near-total impunity of prison guards who torture imprisoned men and women. These studies are to be applauded, then, both for their exposures of the social problems that mass-produce prisons and prisoners, and for their careful engagements with the breach of prisoners’ human rights—“an arena of human rights violations [that remains] largely invisible within the [United States].”<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, the stories of prisoner abuse that emerge in these studies are disturbingly incomplete. In *Lockdown America*, for instance, Parenti only half-describes California prisons as sites of “official terror”: though he indicates how courts and prison administrations have made it possible for guards to legally open fire on unarmed

---

<sup>38</sup> Sudhir Venkatesh, rev. of *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, by Christian Parenti, *Theoretical Criminology* 5 (2001): 108-109; Theodore Sasson, rev. of *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, by Christian Parenti, *Punishment and Society* 3 (2001): 547-550; Asatar Bair, rev. of *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, by Christian Parenti, *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 34 (2002): 380-382; Auli Ek, *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2005): 3; Justin E.H. Smith, “Making Sense of the U.S. Prison Industry,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 8.1 (2005): 83-96.

<sup>39</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 157.

prisoners, Parenti never once engages the perspectives of those imprisoned men who were threatened or wounded by the guards' live and wooden baton rounds. On the one hand, Parenti intends to be sympathetic in his consideration of prisoners' mistreatment and liquidation. For instance, he raises the case of an African American prisoner who was "accidentally" shot to death by Corcoran prison guards in 1994, reveals how an integrated yard policy established by the California legislature enabled these guards to legally arrange and "settle" fights among rival prison gangs, and records the alarming numbers of male prisoners who were injured and killed as a result of these staged shootings from 1989 to 1998. On the other hand, though, Parenti alone offers the critical examination of these shootings: prisoners' interpretations of these sadistic assaults never once emerge in Parenti's study.<sup>40</sup> Thus, if "to [fully] comprehend the American prison one must turn to...those who have experienced its secret world," as H. Bruce Franklin contends; if "prisoners' intimate involvement with the injustices of positive law makes them valuable and concrete theorists of justice" whose critical input is "necessary," as Michael Hames-Garcia argues, then Parenti's brilliant analysis of "official terror" in the California prison system is still wanting, is still desperately in need of prisoners' own assessments of their institutional abuse.<sup>41</sup>

In a similar vein, in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Davis draws attention to a 1996 incident at a private detention center in Texas where unarmed male prisoners, disproportionately black men, became objects of corrections officers' racial slurs, boot-

---

<sup>40</sup> Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 1999): 170-174.

<sup>41</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, "The Inside Stories of the Global American Prison," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 50.3 (2008): 235; Michael Hames-Garcia, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): xliii, xliv.

kicking, cattle prodding, and police dog attacks. Davis's reading of the brutality is sharp, not least because she indicates how this "incident" is far from unique—how it is best understood as just one instance of the unchecked racialized aggression that incarcerated persons suffer in U.S. jails and prisons every day. Still, Davis's discussion of the incident, drawn from her viewing of a videotape aired on national television, as well as her engagement with news articles published in the *Washington Post*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, and the *Kansas City Star*, offers only two short sentences of commentary from an abused prisoner: "What you saw on tape wasn't a fraction of what happened that day," said inmate Louis Watkins [...]. I've never seen anything like that in the movies."<sup>42</sup> Harrowing accounts of inmate injury and death in the restraint chair, a 1990s version of psychiatrist Benjamin Rush's disturbingly *un-tranquil* tranquilizing chair, emerge in discussions of prisoner mistreatment offered by investigative journalists like Anne-Marie Cusac, who contributes to Herivel and Wright's *Prison Nation*. While the names of numerous prisoners who have died or suffered injury in the restraint chair appear in *Prison Nation*, prisoners' assessments of guards' sadistic use of the punishment device never surface in the book. Once again, the perspectives of those who have experienced or witnessed abuse in the penal terrain are overlooked in a detailed, justice-minded examination of such abuse.<sup>43</sup>

I am arguing that on one level, these studies' provocative exposures of "cruel and unusual punishment" definitely represent rare, commendable, and vitally necessary work.

---

<sup>42</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 95-97. See also Angela Y. Davis, "Race, Gender, and Prison History: From the Convict Lease System to the Supermax Prison," *Prison Masculinities*, eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 41-42.

<sup>43</sup> Anne-Marie Cusac, "The Restraint Chair," *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor*, eds. Tara Herivel and Paul Wright (New York: Routledge, 2003): 216-226.

It is quite obvious that discussions of prisoner abuse in *Lockdown America, Are Prisons Obsolete?* and *Prison Nation* bear out Colin Dayan's observation that "through often ingenious *legal* maneuvers, the Supreme Court has paved the way for cruelty in prison life that passes for necessary or commonplace."<sup>44</sup> These studies also rank among the most widely-referenced prison abolitionist works that treat prisoner abuse as a subject of extended discussion. Still, for as brilliant and conscientious as they are, the authors of these works fail to depict abuse-surviving prisoners as knowledgeable commentators on prisoner abuse—as textual authorities who have long been engaged in critical thought on the magnitude and nature of prisoner mistreatment. One can only wonder, for instance, how Parenti's "official terror" chapter might have read if the imprisoned men whose bodies were used for guards' target practice were afforded space on the page to offer their own assessments of such routinized exploitation, how provocatively the abuse in the Texas private prison might have been theorized in Davis's study had the testimonies of tormented inmates occupied the narrative's foreground, how forcefully Cusac's condemnation of the restraint chair might have been advanced by prisoners' own insights on the racial dimensions of its use.

Sadly, the yet-unknown angles of these stories—angles that, I argue, would likely include prisoners' articulations of resistance to abuse—are often inaccessible to these authors and the free-world reading public. The increased outlawing and hyper-surveillance of face-to-face interviews with prisoners have made it very difficult for

---

<sup>44</sup> Colin Dayan, *The Story of Cruel and Unusual* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007): 39, italics mine.

investigative journalists to receive prisoners' extended accounts of abuse behind bars.<sup>45</sup> So well-intentioned prison studies scholars like Parenti, Davis, and Cusac often draw from and reproduce these journalists' truncated prisoner abuse stories; justice-minded academics, that is to say, unwittingly participate in a discourse of prisoner abuse storytelling that often overlooks the severity of the harm done to prisoners, as well as the reality of prisoners' resistance against routine mistreatment behind bars.

Moreover, because "the State can and does regulate personal storytelling as part of [prisoners'] punishment," because the news media and court system fail to describe prisoner abuse experiences accurately or comprehensively, because prison programs that promote prisoners' writing on institutional abuse continue to be defunded, and because institutional abuse often escapes what imprisoned authors can legibly express without receiving severe retribution from prison staff, it is unlikely that the first-person, unabridged versions of these abuse stories will reach the free world anytime soon.<sup>46</sup> And even if prisoners' abuse stories *did* somehow manage to enter the discourse of free society in their imprisoned authors' desired format, one must remember that the abused prisoner is always already ensnared in a representational crisis simply because he or she is imprisoned. More to the point, regardless of whether they claim to have been abused or not, those persons who society labels convicts (regardless of their actual commission of a crime) are not easily understood as victims. They are seen, first and foremost, as

---

<sup>45</sup> Cristina Rathbone, *A World Apart: Women, Prison, and Life Behind Bars* (New York: Random House, 2005): xii.

<sup>46</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 183; Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009): 8; Auli Ek, *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2005): 1, 5-6.

perpetrators, and, as Schafer and Smith have argued in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, “[free-worlders’] attitudes toward perpetrators of crime affect the stories [they] want to hear from the convicted and incarcerated and [their] ethical responsiveness...to them.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, an ideological construction of criminals as innately evil in free society, in addition to the increasing legal restrictions against prisoner abuse storytelling, represent strategies to effectively silence abused prisoners. Thus, H. Bruce Franklin is right when he declares that “the public is not supposed to know of or be concerned with any degradation or abuse going on inside the prison nor with the prisoners’ responses to their punishment.”<sup>48</sup> Following Franklin, I argue that prison administrations, the courts, the state—and because of their relative silence, the general public—have collaborated in the abused prisoner’s dispossession of voice.

In this dissertation, I am particularly interested in the political stakes of the state’s dispossessing power over abused prisoners’ voices, in the incredible people, insights, and stories that wind up buried as a result of this disturbingly large-scale divestment. More to the point, as a literary studies scholar, I am attentive to the extent to which prisoners’ clandestine abuse storytelling practices, critical thinking on prisoner abuse, articulations of resistance strategies, and redefinitions of self and community remain largely unspoken. As we have seen, even the most sympathetic examinations of prisoner abuse—such as those that Parenti, Davis, and Cusac provide—ultimately fall short of addressing abused prisoners’ dispossession of voice. Given their compact, academic form, as well as the experiential distance between these authors and the abused prisoners they discuss, the

---

<sup>47</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 161.

<sup>48</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1998): 2.

stories of prisoner mistreatment that appear in these studies simply do not privilege, or even capture, the narrative perspective that is arguably most essential: the abused prisoner's. As with the websites, essays, reports, and documentaries produced by human rights activists and organizations who seek to "personalize the suffering of those living behind bars," these academic studies also confront the challenge of representing the abuse narratives of captive people whose stories cannot be fully or fairly represented.<sup>49</sup>

Yet I argue that the field of literary studies shows us that this quandary of telling stories that must be told, but can't be—this *methodological* challenge involving how justice advocates partner with abuse survivors in disclosing stories of routine victimization—is not a new one.<sup>50</sup> Responding to conventions in abolitionist literature and the slave narrative genre that Toni Morrison argues constrained the narrative expression of the enslaved, conventions that involved "shaping [a brutal] experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it," many late-twentieth century black American and black British authors have drawn from historical narratives and their imaginations in order to write speculatively about the brutality of the slave ship.<sup>51</sup> Of particular interest to me is the fact that these poets, playwrights, and novelists—M. Nourbese Philip, Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Caryl

---

<sup>49</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 173.

<sup>50</sup> My phraseology here ("telling stories that must be told, but can't be") reflects my engagement with *Zong!*, M. Nourbese Philips's amazing collection of experimental poetry. In October 2009, I had the opportunity to help teach this collection and think through this representing-the-unrepresentable phenomenon in Dr. Fred Moten's contemporary American literature course at Duke University. This paragraph in particular is indebted to the comments of Dr. Moten and his students.

<sup>51</sup> Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: New York Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990): 301.

Phillips, and Fred D’Aguiar—have dared to envision the repeated rape, torture, and slaughter that characterized the Middle Passage *from the perspectives of enslaved sufferers*. Philip, Baraka, Morrison, Johnson, Phillips, and D’Aguiar, that is to say, have each delved at length into archives and personally meditated on stories about slave ship life in order to depict the Transatlantic Slave Trade’s routine terrors from the previously unacknowledged viewpoint of the abused captive. As Paul Gilroy has observed, these writers represent a rare league of creative expressionists: they are a group of literary justice advocates whose sustained engagements with the voices of the voiceless are, in fact, vital political interventions.<sup>52</sup> In Foucauldian terms, these writers have sought out, inhabited, and excavated—by way of their imaginations—the “subjugated knowledge” of the abused slave ship captive. Through their imaginative labors, Philip, Baraka, Morrison, Johnson, Phillips, and D’Aguiar have exhumed previously unrecorded, disguised, or discredited abuse narratives from the eighteenth and nineteenth century’s many middle passages.<sup>53</sup>

To return to my concerns with contemporary prisoner abuse storytelling, it is my contention that these writers’ speculative works, as well as the fictionalized prisoner abuse narratives that appear in the work of Baldwin and Gaines, have a particularly radical utility. These African American novels point not only to the under-acknowledged presence of abused captives’ voices, but also to the complexity of their interior lives, the profound range of their critical thinking, and the unforeseen community that they create

---

<sup>52</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993): 218.

<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, Trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997):7-8.

through clandestine literary practices. Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Morrison's *Beloved*, Johnson's *Middle Passage*, and Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* show us, in other words, that abused captives' experiences are characterized by bodily deprivation *and* bodily reclamation, brutal isolation *and* clandestine community. More to the point, I am arguing that the prisoner abuse narrative in contemporary African American fiction represents a timely response to the extensive legal measures that have been taken to dispossess the abused prisoner of voice. In their prisoner abuse fiction, Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines recognize our dire need for captives' critical perspectives. In contradistinction to the discrediting practices of the courts, prison administrations, and the state writ large, these African American fiction authors demonstrate through their writings an awareness that abuse-surviving captives are uniquely positioned to educate free and unfree worlds about humanity and community.

## **Chapter Outline**

In terms of methodology, this dissertation is organized chronologically (according to the publication date of each novel), taking its cues from a seminal work in the field of African American literary studies: Robert Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Like Stepto's study, the critical landscape in *From Slave Ship to Supermax* is shaped by meticulous analyses of thematically-related African American literary texts—in this case, post-1970 African American novels about abuse-transcribing captives—and the delineation of a narrative tradition that is both distinct *in* and *to* African American literature. Moreover, drawing from Stepto's attentiveness to how authors of African American literature cultivate innovative narrative forms within,

against, and outside of the terms of authentication established by Western print culture, this dissertation reveals how contemporary African American fiction authors turn to personal witness and the imagination as they highlight narrative techniques that prisoners and slaves employ in order to demonstrate authorial control.

The first chapter, “Talking in George Jackson’s Shadow: The Voice of the Imprisoned Intellectual in Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*,” traces the emergence of prisoner abuse storytelling in contemporary African American fiction to the testimonies of police violence and prisoner mistreatment in Baldwin’s fiction. I open the chapter by showing how the character Richard in Baldwin’s 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* becomes the archetypal victim of police misconduct and prisoner abuse in Baldwin’s oeuvre: a proud black man in his twenties who is the object of intense police surveillance, wrongful incrimination, and extralegal violence. I am especially interested in how Baldwin’s childhood confrontations with police aggression and his witnessing of prisoner abuse during his literary career inform confrontations between white police officers and black Harlemites in his 1974 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Moreover, I argue that critiques of the criminal justice system offered by abused prisoners and their advocates in *Beale Street* reflect Baldwin’s very intentional engagement with theories about social control, racial profiling, and prisoner abuse penned by imprisoned intellectual George Jackson. Jackson was a prisoner abuse survivor and Black Panther Party Field Marshall whose lethal shooting in 1971 by San Quentin guards inspired Baldwin’s famous remark: “No Black person will ever believe that George Jackson died the way they tell us he did.”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Baldwin qtd. in George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): x.

Responding to the glaring underrepresentation and misrepresentation of sexual victimization in the contemporary women's prison, the second chapter, "'Unspeakable Thoughts, Unspoken': Morrison's *Beloved* and Testimony of Women Prisoners' Abuse," argues that the abuse narratives of female slave ship captives in Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* are haunted by contemporary stories of women prisoners' abuse. Drawing from Brenda Smith's legal scholarship and Avery Gordon's conception of haunting as the lingering after-effects of abusive systems of power, I show how the novel's recurring depiction of rape on slave ships alludes to a condition of gendered punishment that began with the Middle Passage and persists in contemporary women's prisons. Further, by recovering details on Morrison's professional labors at Random House—which included her editing of Angela Y. Davis's prison autobiography and *Eva's Man*, Gayl Jones's novel about an abused woman prisoner—I make the case that Morrison's engagement with stories about contemporary imprisoned women prior to writing *Beloved* set the stage for her depiction of women captives who testify not only of sexual victimization, but also of resistance, bodily reclamation, and community-building strategies.

Chapter 3, "From Slave Ship to Supermax: Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Suspensions of 'Civilized Law,' and Evidentiary Abuse Testimony" examines how Johnson's depictions of slave ship social relations are haunted by contemporary prisoners' writings on routinized abuse in U.S. maximum and supermaximum security prisons. Specifically, I argue that the abuse testimonies of male slave ship captives in Johnson's 1990 novel are shadowed by those of imprisoned writers who allude to slave ships in order to situate their routine mistreatment in high-security "corrections" sites in a broader historical context of large-scale immobilization and degradation. Drawing from

Avery Gordon's conception of haunting, Colin Dayan's legal scholarship, and Dylan Rodríguez's theory of contemporary imprisonment as a "technology of violence" that traces its roots to the Middle Passage, I show how the unchecked incapacitation of Johnson's fictional captives in a "worse than prison" locale where "civilized law" no longer "holds water" spectrally alludes to a condition of repressive social control and dehumanization that has come to typify the high-security prison.

The final chapter, "With his pencil and his notebook, he tries to define his humanity": The Voice of the Abused Death Row Prisoner in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*," traces the characterization of Jefferson, *A Lesson Before Dying*'s protagonist to the autobiographical prisoner abuse narrative that haunted its production: Willie Francis's 1947 pamphlet, *My Trip to the Chair*. I begin by drawing attention to Gaines's claim that as a young writer he was so "horrified" by witnessing executions of San Quentin's death row prisoners that he had to write—that the narrative of *A Lesson* developed from Gaines's unrelenting "nightmares of [prisoner] executions" and his desire to know "what a person had to go through the week before, the day before, the night before he had to die."<sup>55</sup> With this in mind, I show how the abuse narrative of Gaines's youthful death row protagonist in *A Lesson* is also informed by Gaines's engagement with the life story and death row writing of Willie Francis—a black youth whose failed electrocution in 1946 and subsequent appeal for justice to the U.S. Supreme Court made headlines but did not release him from a violent and spectacularized second execution

---

<sup>55</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with Dan Stone, "Ernest J. Gaines: *A Lesson Before Dying*," 16 August 2007, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIaUxGHeSfo>>.

and premature death. By excavating Gaines's under-discussed personal witness of death-row imprisonment and prisoner execution as a young writer, and by carefully thinking through the language he uses to describe his horror and fascination with the suppressed abuse testimonies of Francis and other death row prisoners, I offer a reading of *A Lesson* that demonstrates just how profoundly Francis's plight and literary production shadow Gaines's characterization of Jefferson. Ultimately, I argue that Jefferson, like Francis, attains voice and reconstituted personhood at the height of his institutional subjection—during those final weeks, days, and hours he spends on death row, writing and selectively circulating his reassessments of his criminalized and racially-caricatured identity.

## 1. Talking in George Jackson's Shadow: The Voice of the Imprisoned Intellectual in Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Only a handful of the millions of people in this vast place are aware that the fate intended for you, Sister Angela, and for George Jackson, and for the numberless prisoners in our concentration camps—for that is what they are—is a fate which is about to engulf them, too.

—James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis”<sup>1</sup>

Prison preoccupied the literary imagination of James Baldwin. Yet biographer David Leeming is one of the few to notice that “[p]risons and prisoners were a significant part of Baldwin’s *personal* experience.”<sup>2</sup> Even the most cursory glance at Baldwin’s published works and interviews bear out Leeming’s important observation. In his 1955 essay, “Equal in Paris,” Baldwin reveals that during his time in France, he was “arrested as a receiver of stolen goods and spent eight days in prison.”<sup>3</sup> In his longer 1972 essay, *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin reflects on frequent prison visits that he made to his friend Tony Maynard, a black man who had been falsely charged with the murder of a white Marine in the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Baldwin’s prisoner advocacy, which also included his aid in the release of Black Panther Party co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, would deeply inform his writings and public addresses throughout the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Outraged

---

<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis,” *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 210.

<sup>2</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994): 323, italics mine. A notable exception to my claim is an excellent essay by D. Quentin Miller that examines Baldwin’s relationship to his imprisoned friend Tony Maynard. D. Quentin Miller, “‘On the Outside Looking In’: White Readers of Nonwhite Prison Narratives,” *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005): 15-32.

<sup>3</sup> James Baldwin, “Equal in Paris” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955): 138.

<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dial Press, 1972): 100-149, 196.

<sup>5</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994): 292-294, 304. Baldwin also wrote the foreword to Bobby Seale’s autobiography, *A Lonely Range: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale*.

in 1970 by political prisoner Angela Y. Davis's appearance on the cover of *Newsweek* in handcuffs, Baldwin published an open letter to Davis in the *New York Review of Books* in which he compared Davis's plight with that of a "Jewish housewife in the boxcar headed for Dachau."<sup>6</sup> Then, speaking out about racism in the criminal justice system on the *Dick Cavett Show* in 1973, Baldwin won the widespread admiration of black prisoners, receiving "so many letters from them that he determined to arrange a Christmas version of [his musical drama] 'The Hallelujah Chorus' that would...tour American prisons."<sup>7</sup> Finally, in 1982, Baldwin published "A Letter to Prisoners," a piece in which he ruffled many feathers by insisting that "artists and prisoners have more in common with one another than have servants of the State."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Baldwin was a stranger neither to prison nor prison issues; he was also no stranger to witnessing and writing about prisoner abuse. Baldwin's longstanding attention to the treatment of the imprisoned in his literary work will be my focus in this chapter. I will begin by providing context on how Baldwin's early writings shape his later-fiction depictions of jailhouse beatings and prison rape as predictable outcomes of resistance to racial repression. This background will help to provide a critical framework for my new reading of Baldwin's penultimate novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

---

<sup>6</sup> James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 207.

<sup>7</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994): 321.

<sup>8</sup> James Baldwin, "A Letter to Prisoners," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 212.

## 1.1 An Introduction to Baldwin's Writings on Prisoner Abuse

It seems that almost anywhere one looks in Baldwin's voluminous body of work, s/he will find that Baldwin is a witness to the prisoner in pain. Recalling his brief confinement in France's Fresnes prison in his essay "Equal in Paris," Baldwin confesses that he was terrified by the sight of "a man, all blood, being carried back to *his* cell on a stretcher."<sup>9</sup> In his book-length essay *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin's assessment of wounds that prison guards inflicted on his friend Tony Maynard is even more disturbing:

Tony had been beaten, and beaten very hard; his cheekbones had disappeared and one of his eyes was crooked; he looked swollen above the neck, and he took down his shirt collar, presently, to show us the swelling on his shoulders. And he was weeping, trying not to—I had seen him with tears in his eyes, but I had never seen him weeping.<sup>10</sup>

Baldwin later remarked that Maynard's abusive treatment by prison guards, as well as his racially-motivated arrest amounted to "political persecution." Maynard's wrongful conviction and mistreatment behind bars would torment Baldwin for years. Prior to writing about Maynard, Baldwin had composed a civil rights play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, in which a black character named Pete was also subjected to jailhouse beatings. In an unforgettable scene in the acclaimed 1964 drama, guards beat Pete and a fellow black demonstrator so severely that Pete screams "a long, loud, animal cry," and cannot distinguish between real and imagined acts of prisoner abuse:<sup>11</sup>

Lorenzo. Lorenzo? I was dreaming—dreaming—dreaming... Big Jim Byrd's boys was beating us and beating us and beating us and Big Jim Byrd was laughing. And Anna Mae Taylor was on her knees, she was trying to pray. She say, 'Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord, come help us,' and they kept beating on her and

---

<sup>9</sup> James Baldwin, "Equal in Paris," *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955): 156.

<sup>10</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dial Press, 1972): 115.

<sup>11</sup> James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (New York: Dial Press, 1964): 90.

beating on her and I saw the blood coming down her neck and they put the prods to her, and oh, Lorenzo! They was kicking that woman...and then they put that prod to my head—ah! *ah!*—to my *head!* Lorenzo! I can't see right! What have they done to my head? Lorenzo! Lorenzo...they mean to kill us all—<sup>12</sup>

From lingering on Maynard's physical and psychological affliction in *No Name in the Street* to depicting the brutal treatment of black prisoners in *Blues for Mister Charlie* and in his fiction works "Going to Meet the Man," *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin's oeuvre bears witness to the unsettling ordinariness of racialized prisoner abuse in American penal practice.

In Baldwin's fiction, abused prisoners are usually young African American men whose victimization begins with their subjection to unchecked police aggression. Richard, a twenty-two-year-old, self-educated black man who shows up only as a minor character in Baldwin's 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is Baldwin's archetypal victim of prisoner abuse. From the moment Richard appears in *Go Tell*, his ostentatious race pride foreshadows his abusive treatment in a racist criminal justice system: "No white son-of-a-bitch *nowhere* [will] never talk me down...never make me feel like *I* [am] dirt...he [isn't] going to beat my ass."<sup>13</sup> One Saturday night, Richard's leisurely wait at a New York subway station is interrupted by "two colored boys...running down the steps," his unexplained search and seizure by white men, and his being falsely accused of robbing a nearby store.<sup>14</sup> Despite Richard's insistence on his absence from the scene of the crime—"But *I* wasn't there! Look at me...I wasn't *there!*"—the white storeowner

---

<sup>12</sup> James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (New York: Dial Press, 1964): 90-91.

<sup>13</sup> James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Dial Press, 1964): 167.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

identifies him as one of the four thieves: “You black bastards...you’re all the same.”<sup>15</sup> After being handcuffed and taken to the city jail, Richard’s refusal to sign a confession acknowledging his culpability in the robbery earns him a beating from police interrogators so severe he can “hardly walk” the next day.<sup>16</sup> Though Richard is jailed following this incident, he is eventually found innocent of the robbery and released. And yet Richard is so shaken by the law’s barefaced racial prejudice and the state’s unrestricted power to humiliate, criminalize, and punish that he commits suicide the night after his exoneration. Baldwin’s depiction of Richard’s post-incarceration trauma, as well as the clear violation of his Fourth and Eighth Amendment rights, bespeak a precision so disturbing the narrative seems personal.<sup>17</sup> In his essay “Down at the Cross,” which was published in *The Fire Next Time* a decade after *Go Tell*’s release, Baldwin reveals that Richard’s subjection to police violence was, in fact, semiautobiographical: “When I was ten...two policemen amused themselves with frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning my ancestry and sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem’s empty lots.”<sup>18</sup> While growing up, Baldwin regularly encountered police aggression in New York City, where, as the cases of Hinton Johnson, Eleanor Bumpurs, Yvonne Smallwood, Tracy Brock, Abner

---

<sup>15</sup> James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Dial Press, 1964): 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>17</sup> The Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution asserts protects citizens from “unreasonable searches and seizures”; the Eighth Amendment prohibits the state’s practice of “cruel and unusual punishments.”

<sup>18</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963): 33-34.

Louima, Amadou Diallo, Marcus Ferguson, and Andre Burgess have shown us, racialized police brutality has continued to be especially notorious.<sup>19</sup>

Richard's story, though, does more than illustrate Baldwin's condemnation of police misconduct, racial bias, and prisoner abuse. Richard's story also bespeaks Baldwin's skill with using fiction in the service of justice advocacy. More to the point, by representing prisoner abuse in *Go Tell* as a rights violation that is interconnected with police victimization, Baldwin participates in a very particular literary tradition—a tradition in which authors relate the unjust treatment of convicts behind bars to the practice of unprosecuted state violence in free society. Prison literature scholar H. Bruce Franklin reminds us that this tradition began in the 1840s and 50s when imprisoned writers, who had grown largely disinterested in mass-producing confessional narratives and sensationalist crime stories, began writing poems and autobiographical works that linked guards' routine and unpunished exploitation of prisoners with acts of police misconduct. These early "political prisoner" writings included poems like "The Prisoners in Jail," a piece in which white anti-rent activist Mortimer Belden remarks that guards "seize upon prisoners" and "do as they please" while "sheriffs...all hell they don't fear...bring [men] in guilty if they prove themselves clear."<sup>20</sup>

Richard's prisoner abuse narrative in *Go Tell* updates this tradition, as do stories of police victimization and jailhouse beatings in Baldwin's later fiction works "Going to

---

<sup>19</sup> For more, see Human Rights Watch's investigation of the New York City Police Department in a 1998 report, *Shielded from Justice: Police Brutality and Accountability in the United States*, which can be accessed online at <<http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/reports98/police/uspo99.htm>>.

<sup>20</sup> Belden qtd. in H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 131.

Meet the Man,” *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. In these works, representations of police and/or prison guard misconduct are fictional rather than autobiographical, and are deeply informed by a racialized historical context. Baldwin, that is to say, exposes relations between white supremacy and state violence in his fiction by making frequent reference to the institution of slavery in his depictions of racial vigilantism, police intimidation, and prisoner mistreatment. To take the example of Baldwin’s 1965 story “Going to Meet the Man,” a white sheriff who displays “peculiar excitement” as he unleashes his cattle prod on an already-wounded black prisoner—a civil rights activist Baldwin describes as a “boy roll[ing] around in his own...blood...as the prod hit his testicles”—disturbingly recalls the many white slave owners whose greatest delight, as ex-slave Harriet Jacobs reveals in her 1861 narrative, came from torturing defenseless male slaves.<sup>21</sup> After two unarmed black boys (including one who is but ten years old) are seized without cause and excessively patted down by white policemen in Baldwin’s 1968 novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, the elder boy bemoans the futility of taking down the officers’ badge numbers by describing police impunity and racial humiliation in the context of slavery:

You know a friendly judge? We got money for a lawyer? Somebody they going to *listen* to? You know as well as me they beating on black ass all the time, all the time, man, they get us in that precinct house and make us confess to all kinds of things and sometimes even kill us and don’t nobody give a damn. Don’t nobody care what happens to a black man. If they didn’t need us for work, they’d have killed us a long time ago. They did it to the Indians.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> James Baldwin, *Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1998): 936; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001): 41.

<sup>22</sup> James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (New York: Dial Press, 1968): 64.

In Baldwin's 1974 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, the girlfriend of an abused black prisoner alludes to slavery in order to register the historical significance of his regular encounters with police victimization and prisoner abuse. She refers to the slave in order to illustrate how a purportedly abolished system of racialized terror underlies the state's ordinary (mis)treatment of criminals—and those who are prejudicially labeled as such.

In the pages that follow, I argue that Baldwin situates state violence (by which I mean the bodily affliction of civilians or prisoners by police officers and prison guards) in *If Beale Street Could Talk* in a racialized historical context by drawing from the narrative techniques of imprisoned intellectual and prisoner abuse survivor George Jackson. It is no secret that Baldwin was so consumed by Jackson's prison letter collection *Soledad Brother* that he wanted to make a film based on it.<sup>23</sup> I make the case that Jackson's model of racism as a form of social control informs narrative development in Baldwin's novel. Jackson conceptualizes his life of economic exploitation, police brutality, and prisoner abuse as constituting a "modern variety of chattel slavery."<sup>24</sup> Baldwin, in turn, appropriates Jackson's allusion to the slave past in order to illustrate the predictability—rather than the tragic exceptionality—of police aggression and prisoner abuse. As an extended meditation on the criminal justice system that positions victims of police attacks as textual authorities, Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* is, I argue,

---

<sup>23</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994): 311. Baldwin is not the only literary figure to have been fascinated with Jackson's prison letters. "The Cargo Rap," a section of award-winning British writer Caryl Phillip's 1989 novel *Higher Ground*, is modeled in content and form after Jackson's 1970 collection of prison letters, *Soledad Brother*.

<sup>24</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 251.

instructive for rethinking conventional stories of police harassment and prisoner abuse. We frequently encounter such stories in human rights literature published by advocacy organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Because the authors of these stories rarely offer the perspectives of abuse survivors, they neglect survivors' important critical thinking about their abuse experiences. Yet by drawing attention to how his characters utilize the language of slavery in order to critique contemporary state violence, Baldwin rescues his abuse survivors from such social scientism, and infuses them with the vitality of subjective experience.

## 1.2 Baldwin's Witness of Abused Political Prisoner George Jackson

David Leeming has called *If Beale Street Could Talk* "Baldwin's prison parable, a fictionalization of his prison concerns during the 1968-73 period."<sup>25</sup> Trudier Harris describes *Beale Street* as "one of the most striking representations of prison experience in African American literature," and Horace Porter reminds us that the novel, "while ostensibly a love story, dramatizes the travesty and inefficiency of the American justice system."<sup>26</sup> Baldwin himself declared that "the key to the book is the [U.S] prison situation."<sup>27</sup> In light of these observations, I argue that *Beale Street* offers us Baldwin's most probing look into police impunity and prisoner abuse. Foregrounding the role of

---

<sup>25</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994): 323.

<sup>26</sup> Trudier Harris-Lopez, *South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002): 138; Horace A. Porter, *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (Middletown, CT; Wesleyan University Press, 1989): 12.

<sup>27</sup> James Baldwin, interview with Herbert R. Lottman, "It's Hard to Be James Baldwin," *Intellectual Digest*, July 1972, 67-68.

racial bias in the false arrest and abusive incarceration of Harlemite craftsman Fonny Hunt, Baldwin's penultimate novel provides provocative commentary on an epoch of racialized state repression. In a Civil Rights and Black Power Movement era in which the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) bent but mostly broke the law in order to systematically criminalize, incarcerate, and kill hundreds of black political activists (many who Baldwin knew personally), Baldwin initially conceived of *Beale Street* as a novel about "a black revolutionary in an American jail whose pregnant wife gives birth to their son at the instant [he] is slain."<sup>28</sup> While the black character Fonny is not affiliated with any of the revolutionary organizations that COINTELPRO targeted, his plight and persona are not far removed from that of the "black revolutionary" who preoccupied Baldwin's original vision for the novel.

Fonny is, in fact, regularly targeted by white policemen because of his race, gender, and what Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson might call his "cool pose." Throughout the novel, Fonny's direct stare into the eyes of law enforcement officers and his stoic postures represent both a coping mechanism and a perceived threat, an "expressive performance that helps [him] counter stress caused by social oppression and racism...[that] communicate[s] power, toughness, detachment, and style."<sup>29</sup> As he is scrutinized by racially-prejudiced New York City policemen, Fonny's eyes convey defiant speech, and are indeed, as Trudier Harris has argued so superbly, weapons:

---

<sup>28</sup> Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988): xii, 37-99; Baldwin qtd. in George Goodman, Jr., "For James Baldwin, a Rap on Baldwin," *New York Review of Books* 26 June 1972, 29 October 2011 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-rap.html>>.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992): 3, 8.

“Fonny looked straight at [Officer] Bell [and] Bell looked straight ahead. *I’m going to fuck you, boy*, Bell’s eyes said. *No you won’t*, said Fonny’s eyes. *I’m going to get my shit together and haul ass out of here.*”<sup>30</sup> To call to mind the important work of Maurice Wallace, Fonny is best understood as one who is spectragraphically monitored—as a black man who is both seen and unseen under an unrelenting, racialized police gaze. Fonny’s ritualized expressions of black masculinity frame him in every sense of the word. On the one hand, Fonny’s stinging one-liners and penetrating glare go unnoticed by most New Yorkers; they have no bearing whatsoever on public safety. Yet they become punishable expressions at the precise moment white policemen see them as posing a threat to their unspoken racial superiority. In other words, Fonny’s *perceived* aggression, despite being conveniently and prejudicially invented by law enforcement officers, is codified as transgression. His *perceived* aggression both captures the attention of white policemen and facilitates his capture. To recall again Wallace’s *Constructing the Black Masculine*, Fonny’s “cool pose” can be said to “embody the inverse picture necessary for the positive self-portrait of white identity.”<sup>31</sup>

As the novel opens, Fonny is described as a “bad nigger” who is known by a nonsense, Black revolutionary swagger.<sup>32</sup> In addition to frequently “rais[ing] his fist” and “always...st[anding] up,” Fonny refuses to be berated by Officer Bell, an overtly

---

<sup>30</sup> Trudier Harris, “The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*,” *MELUS* 5.3 The Pressures of History (1978): 54-66; James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 172.

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 32.

<sup>32</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 37.

racist white policeman.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, for Fonny, the Harlem ghetto—and the United States writ large—is indeed the police state famously described by former prisoner and Harlem resident Malcolm X.<sup>34</sup> A far cry from civilian protectors, the policemen who patrol Fonny’s side of town are threatening and combative racial profilers—in the words of the novel’s narrator, “the worst cops.” For instance, when Fonny takes a long walk one evening, he is hyperpoliced, watched both by “the cop car parked on the corner, with the two cops in it, [and] other cops swaggering slowly along the sidewalk.” This panoptic scenario repeats itself throughout the novel. After having dinner with Fonny at his favorite Spanish restaurant, Tish Rivers, Fonny’s wide-eyed, nineteen-year-old black lover, mentions: “There was a patrol car parked across the street from our house.”<sup>35</sup> Fonny is not alone in this predicament. As a child, Tish is warned that “the [city] police would come and put [her] in the electric chair.” Moreover, Fonny’s friend Daniel Carty, a “big, black boy” who is repeatedly arrested on trumped-up charges, remarks that white policemen are “always passing by” his neighborhood in Harlem. The police incessantly circle the block in search of black bodies they can put away downtown, and, according to Daniel, “com[e] in their pants” when they manage to do so. Daniel’s latter observation seems a bit overstated, yet readers later discover that Fonny’s nemesis, Officer Bell, has recently murdered a twelve-year-old black boy, and, having escaped legal penalty, “walk[s] the way John Wayne walks, striding out to clean up the universe.” It thus comes

---

<sup>33</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 6.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1965): 66, 67.

<sup>35</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 9, 55, 144.

as no surprise that when Fonny and Tish move into a new neighborhood downtown, Fonny insists that she be especially wary of those policemen who claim to be her guardians: “We live in a nation of pigs and murderers. I’m scared every time you out of my sight.”<sup>36</sup>

Fonny’s unconcealed disdain for a mostly-white police force foreshadows his racially-motivated arrest. Fonny becomes the object of Officer Bell’s murderous intentions following a public altercation in which an Italian storeowner defends Fonny, and onlookers mock Bell. Shamed to the point of blushing, Bell struggles to flee the jeering crowd. In a moment of desperation, he announces to Fonny, “be seeing you around.” Fonny’s retort, “You may...and then again you may not,” enrages the policeman, so much so that he “intend[s] to kill Fonny.”<sup>37</sup> Bell jumpstarts his murder plot upon receiving word that Mrs. Victoria Rogers, a young Puerto Rican woman, has been raped. Bell immediately accuses and arrests Fonny, who, pending a guilty verdict, faces the death penalty. Despite testimony from Tish and Daniel that Fonny was with them at the time of the rape, despite conflicting details in Bell’s eyewitness report (curiously, he was the crime’s only witness), Mrs. Rogers’s alarming testimony, one later revealed to have been coerced by Bell and other city policemen, seems to seal Fonny’s fate:

*Mrs. Victoria Rogers...declares that on the evening of March 5, between the hours of eleven and twelve, in the vestibule of her home, she was criminally assaulted by a man she now knows to have been Alonzo Hunt, and was used by*

---

<sup>36</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 12, 11, 105, 108, 171, 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 139, 137.

*the aforesaid Hunt in the most extreme and abominable sexual manner, and forced to undergo the most unimaginable sexual perversions.*<sup>38</sup>

It is thus Fonny's "cool pose"—what one scholar calls "Fonny's defiance of the institutionalized manner of determining black self-worth"—that leads to his victimization by the police, and later, jail guards.<sup>39</sup> As Tish reminds readers, "[Fonny] wasn't anybody's nigger. And that's a crime, in this...country. You're supposed to be *somebody's* nigger. And if you're nobody's nigger, you're a bad nigger...that's what the cops decided when Fonny moved downtown."<sup>40</sup>

In his essay on the figure of the embattled craftsman in Baldwin's oeuvre, Houston Baker goes as far as calling Fonny a "political prisoner."<sup>41</sup> Baker's reading, the only published review of *Beale Street* to date to make such a bold claim, is one that demands revisiting. From one angle, Fonny's refusal to be "*somebody's* nigger" is indeed an expression of a racial-political belief. For Bell, Fonny's brazen race pride, speaking out of turn, and open defiance of his white professional authority flagrantly transgress an unwritten racial law, and thus necessitate and sanction Fonny's criminalization and victimization (not necessarily in that order) by law enforcement, the courts, and even jail guards. To thus resituate Baker's claim alongside Angela Davis's famous essay on political repression, I argue that Fonny is *indeed* a political prisoner. As

---

<sup>38</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 117.

<sup>39</sup> Azubike Iloeje, "The Dimensions of Captivity in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *Black Culture and Black Consciousness in Literature*, ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Education Books, 1987): 189.

<sup>40</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 37.

<sup>41</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., "The Embattled Craftsman: An Essay on James Baldwin," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988): 75.

Davis points out, while U.S. political prisoners are formally tried for criminal acts, their perceived culpability has everything to do with how they express their radical politics. More to the point, people like Fonny are arrested, tried, and convicted because they are belligerent social agitators—because they have “*violated the unwritten law* which prohibits disturbances and upheavals in the status quo of exploitation and racism.”<sup>42</sup> Davis’s point notwithstanding, Fonny is also the spitting image of the one political prisoner whose life story captivated Baldwin. The source of Fonny’s characterization, I contend, is traceable to George Jackson, a charismatic, 1960s-era revolutionary who insisted that he was routinely criminalized and beaten by policemen and prison guards because of his race pride, political beliefs, and perceived aggressiveness.<sup>43</sup>

Baldwin was, in a word, transfixed by Jackson. Baldwin spoke at rallies in the U.S. and abroad in support of Jackson’s prison liberation movement, referenced (reverenced?) Jackson in his writings, and even compared Jackson’s mother to the mother of Christ.<sup>44</sup> Jackson was a radical social theorist, a member of the Black Panther Party, and—thanks to the publication of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* by “the nation’s largest publisher of paperbacks”—one of America’s most widely-read

---

<sup>42</sup> Angela Y. Davis, “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, ed. Angela Y. Davis (New Rochelle, NY: Third Press Publishers, 1971): 22, emphasis mine.

<sup>43</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 184-185. I do not dismiss a point raised by many scholars—that traces of the story of Baldwin’s friend, abused prisoner Tony Maynard, are present in Fonny’s plight. However, the tendency of scholars like Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, William J. Weatherby, and Lynn Orilla Scott to imagine Maynard as Baldwin’s sole or primary influence for depicting Fonny’s predicament or his persona seems, in light of my research on Baldwin’s abiding fascination with George Jackson, a bit shortsighted.

<sup>44</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994): 311; James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis,” *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 207, 210; James Baldwin, “Speech from the Soledad Rally,” *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 98-102; James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dial Press, 1972): 197.

imprisoned intellectuals.<sup>45</sup> Jackson's charge at eighteen as an alleged accomplice to a gas station robbery landed him in prison with an indeterminate sentence of one year to life. After being introduced to radical philosophy and the black liberation movement by imprisoned revolutionary W.L. Nolen, Jackson dedicated his years behind bars to studying African American history and Marx, raising prisoners' political consciousness, and fighting an unsubstantiated indictment that he had killed a white prison guard. Following his alleged escape attempt in 1971, Jackson was shot dead by San Quentin prison guards. Instantaneously, competing narratives emerged regarding the true reasons behind his killing. Baldwin's written response to the tragedy would produce, as Brian Conniff reminds us, "the most frequently cited quote related to Jackson's death."<sup>46</sup> Long before insiders confessed that Jackson's shooting was part of prison guards' "mission to kill George Jackson," Baldwin wrote: "No Black person will ever believe that George Jackson died the way they tell us he did."<sup>47</sup> While Baldwin did not embrace Jackson's Marxist ideology, he was, as Randall Kenan points out, fascinated with Jackson, "so taken with Jackson's writing and his story that he wanted to make a film based on Jackson's life."<sup>48</sup> Baldwin never made the film. Yet Baldwin's characterization of *Beale*

---

<sup>45</sup> Lee Bernstein, *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010): 4.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Conniff, "The Prison Writer as Ideologue: George Jackson and the Attica Prison Rebellion," *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005): 150.

<sup>47</sup> Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988): 98; Baldwin qtd. in George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): x; Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988): 98.

<sup>48</sup> Randall Kenan, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 99.

*Street*'s Fonny Hunt as a political prisoner—and also, as we shall see, a slave—points to his serious engagement with Jackson's narrative project in *Soledad Brother*.

### **1.3 Jackson's Slave Metaphor & the Abused Political Prisoner as Slave in *If Beale Street Could Talk***

#### I

Blackmen born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations. *Being born a slave in a captive society* and never experiencing any objective basis for expectation had the effect of preparing me for the progressively traumatic misfortunes that lead so many blackmen to the prison gate. I was prepared for prison. It required only minor psychic adjustments.

—George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*<sup>49</sup>

Baldwin's characterization of Fonny as an abused political prisoner and slave in *Beale Street* can be traced to narrative techniques employed by George Jackson in *Soledad Brother*. At a fundamental level, Jackson uses the term "slave" in his work to elucidate the efficiency with which blacks are economically exploited, criminalized, and controlled by the violence of the state. When Jackson says that he is "born a slave in a captive society" in his work's opening letter, he is referring to specific ways in which his physical and social mobility are circumscribed by the everyday operation of institutionalized racism. Growing up in Chicago's Troop Street Projects in the 1940s, Jackson was the target of relentless racial profiling, the product of segregated schooling, and the inheritor of destitution so severe that stealing was—initially, anyway—his strategy for avoiding starvation.<sup>50</sup> As activist-scholar Dylan Rodríguez notes, Jackson

---

<sup>49</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 4, emphasis mine.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

“recognize[s] his own incarceration as the *logical* outcome of a collective plight. The destiny of...surplus people left to languish under the advance of white-supremacist capital [is] death, addiction, unemployment, and mass warehousing or social liquidation.”<sup>51</sup>

For Jackson, economic inequality (represented particularly in blacks’ forced tolerance of underpaid labor, racist hiring practices, and subsequent unemployment), inferior education, police harassment, incarceration, and prisoner abuse all represent phases “in a sequence of humiliations” reserved for this surplus population. Prison—and the routinized torture that Jackson and any number of disenfranchised men suffered there—is thus an “inevitability,” the result of being “born a slave” in a culture that views certain populations as such a surplus. Moreover, like the slave revolt leader Nat Turner who he so highly esteemed, Jackson sees himself as being punished for daring to express race pride and assert self-determination against those who reserved those privileges for themselves. He thus sees himself as being criminalized and abused for standing up against a repressive social structure—a “captive society” that either grooms black men for prison or drives them “to the abyss of madness.” In his letters, Jackson often makes this argument in figurative terms, such as: “I don’t want to raise any more black slaves.”<sup>52</sup>

Jackson’s use of the slave as a metaphor for group and individual experiences with racialized social control distinguished his writing style and made his work

---

<sup>51</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 120, emphasis mine.

<sup>52</sup> Min S. Lee, *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison: In Which a Utopian Scheme Turns Bedlam* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1973): 124-125; George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 250.

particularly important to Baldwin. Consider, for instance, his April 17, 1970 letter to his lawyer, Fay Stender:

Chattel slavery is an economic condition which manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-determination. The new slavery, the modern variety of chattel slavery updated to disguise itself, places the victim in a factory or in the case of most blacks in support roles inside and around the factory system (service trades), working for a wage. However, if work cannot be found in or around the factory complex, today's neoslavery does not allow even for a modicum of food and shelter. You are free—to starve. The sense and meaning of slavery comes through as a result of our ties to the wage. You must have it, without it you would starve or expose yourself to the elements...held in one spot on this earth because of your economic status, it is just the same as being held in one spot because you are the owner's property.<sup>53</sup>

The language of slavery here can be traced to an earlier note that Jackson writes to Stender in which he refers to himself as an “old slave trying to deal with his environment.”<sup>54</sup> This April 17<sup>th</sup> letter, in other words, is a kind of one-two punch: it enables Jackson to both unpack his slave metaphor at a macro level and also tell his life story through such figurative language. More to the point, by naming the institution of slavery as his narrative framework—by turning to enslavement tropes in order to render comprehensible the systematic nature of his own economic exploitation, under-education, police victimization, and prisoner abuse—Jackson also “names an ancestry,” as Doran Larson points out in his work on imprisoned writers. Jackson persuasively “shift[s] in textual register, from personal autobiography to public testament.”<sup>55</sup> To recall the language he uses in his opening letter, Jackson succeeds in issuing an indictment against a white supremacist social structure precisely because he can convincingly depict himself

---

<sup>53</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 252, 253.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>55</sup> Doran Larsen, “Toward a Prison Poetics,” *College Literature* 37.3 (2010): 145.

as a “runaway slave,” as a fugitive of a damnable social order who is unjustly “captured and brought to prison...because [he] couldn’t adjust” to lingering forms of plantation humiliation.<sup>56</sup>

But Jackson was, of course, no choirboy. As he confesses at the beginning of *Soledad Brother*, “I could play the criminal aspects of my life down some but then it wouldn’t be me...in effect, I lived two lives, the one with my mama and sisters, and the thing on the street.”<sup>57</sup> During his formative years, Jackson was truant and often tangled with the police. When Jackson’s father transferred his post-office job to Los Angeles in hopes of giving young Jackson a new start in life, Jackson accumulated a number of robbery convictions, which landed him in the California Youth Authority detention camp.<sup>58</sup> Still, although Jackson’s penchant for petty theft was undeniable, this is not what earned him a life of systematic abuse. His identification with the slave is meant to head off this conclusion in order to suggest a more primary reason for his incarceration, namely, his transgression of unwritten racial laws.

Consider, for instance, why Jackson says he regularly skipped school and thus became an easy target for police who would harass him: he “couldn’t adjust” to an unofficial law of “separate and equal.” While Jackson grew up in the North where segregation was not legally upheld or militaristically enforced, he was still made to feel

---

<sup>56</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 3, 10.

<sup>58</sup> James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America’s Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*, ed. Joy James (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003): 84-87; Joy James, *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, ed. Joy James (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005): 227.

the pain of racial isolation during his elementary schooling in the 1940s. At the Catholic mission that he attended, Jackson—like his siblings and other Chicago blacks—was fenced out of a spacious garden that was understood by all as a whites-only zone:

St. Malachy's was really two schools. There was another school across the street that was more private than ours. 'We' played and fought on the corner sidewalks bordering the school. 'They' had a large grass-and-tree-studded garden with an eight-foot wrought iron fence bordering it (to keep us out, since it never seemed to keep any of them in when they chose to leave). 'They' were all white [...]. The white students' yard was equipped with picnic tables for spring lunches, swings, slides, and other more sophisticated gadgets...For years we had only the very crowded sidewalks and alley behind the school.<sup>59</sup>

Given the racism implied by St. Malachy's "two schools," Jackson did not see much reason for attending St. Malachy's. Jackson's school resembled more an institution of social control he "couldn't adjust to" than a site of learning. Interestingly, Jackson relates the police victimization that he suffers as a youth to the racial frustrations surrounding his truancy: "I stopped attending school regularly, and started getting picked up by the pigs more often...mainly for 'suspicion of' or because I was in the wrong part of town." On more than one of these pickups, Jackson would be subjected to what he called "oak-stick therapeutics"—violent thrashings in which a policeman would "pop [him] behind the ear...several times" and his father, "mortified," would eventually come and "carry [him] home." While Jackson "wasn't caught for breaking any laws" when picked up as truant, he was, on almost every one of these occasions, a victim of unchecked and unpunished police violence.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Jackson became a target for Chicago police in the first place because he had made up his mind *not* to attend a

---

<sup>59</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

segregated school—because, in his language, perceived “aggression on the part of the slave means crime.”<sup>61</sup>

A similar situation transpires when Jackson is in prison. Jackson, along with Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette, were black prisoners who guards at Soledad Prison identified as militant and influential activists. Collectively known as the Soledad Brothers, the three were accused of killing Opie G. Miller, a white guard whose racist views were well known, and who, as Dylan Rodríguez reminds us, “*assassinated* the widely respected black prison boxing champion, mentor, legal activist, and political organizer W. L. Nolen in January 1970 (as well as black prisoners Cleveland Edwards and Alvin Miller).”<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, Jackson’s culpability could legitimately be seen as probable since Nolen was Jackson’s first and closest prison comrade. Additionally, Jackson was quite candid in his exasperation with the racist attitudes and actions of Soledad guards. He once remarked that “the great majority of Soledad pigs are southern migrants who do not...stop the many racist attacks; they actively encourage them.”<sup>63</sup> Yet there was never any concrete evidence produced indicating that Jackson had, with the help of Drumgo and Clutchette, tossed the guard over the third-tier railing of the prison. Jackson, however, was charged with this heinous crime, and before any verdict was reached in the controversial Soledad Brothers trial, prison officials punished him with indefinite solitary confinement and routine beatings.

---

<sup>61</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 9.

<sup>62</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 117, italics mine.

<sup>63</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 18, 19.

Unsurprisingly, even in the years before his alleged murder of the guard—years in which Jackson successfully organized a prisoners’ liberation movement and regularly spoke out about the plight of comrades who had been victimized by prison guards—Jackson was singled out for mistreatment. Min Lee, who interviewed Jackson on several occasions, notes that “a San Quentin guard nearly broke Jackson’s kneecap” because Jackson tried to thwart institutional attempts to torture a white prisoner who had spoken up for black prisoners’ rights.<sup>64</sup> In a letter to his mother dated November 13, 1965, Jackson writes, “All of the officers here have preconceived notions about my patterns of behavior. Consequently it is somewhat hard for me to avoid falling under suspicion for almost every misdeed perpetrated by a black.”<sup>65</sup> Author and activist Eric Mann, who worked with the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, points out that Jackson’s routine abusive treatment was a tried and tested tool of institutional discipline:

Prison authorities put George through this excruciating torture to make an example of him...It got to a point where [they] were so afraid of George’s influence that any black prisoner who gave [him] the black power salute...was thrown in the hole. They had indeed made an example of him. The system had created a revolutionary monster.<sup>66</sup>

Aggravated by Jackson’s relentless revolutionary activities, Soledad prison administrators confined Jackson in a 6-by-8-foot strip cell in the prison’s O-wing *for years*. There, Jackson was unprotected from wet weather, restricted to washing his hands

---

<sup>64</sup> Min S. Lee, *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison: In Which a Utopian Scheme Turns Bedlam* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1973): 127.

<sup>65</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 79.

<sup>66</sup> Eric Mann, *Comrade George: An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972): 26, 26-27.

once every five days, and locked away for all but thirty minutes of a given day.<sup>67</sup> Years of living without regular human contact took a toll on Jackson. In his letters, he writes:

Try to remember how you felt at the most depressing moment of your life, that moment of your deepest dejection... That is how I feel all the time, no matter what my level of consciousness may be[:] asleep, awake, in between... To be alone constantly is to torture normal men.<sup>68</sup>

Ironically, Jackson's extended periods of isolation, which psychiatrists like Terry A.

Kupers have now shown to be responsible for the serious mental disorders of thousands of prisoners, did not isolate him from the realm of indictment.<sup>69</sup> Again the target of

prison guards' racially-motivated allegations in 1967, Jackson, for once, is stunned:

"They have accused me of leading something when all the evidence points to the contrary [...]. I never raised my hand against an official. In fact, in all the seven years I've been

here I have never attacked an official."<sup>70</sup> In ensuing letters, Jackson remarks that he was

harassed, criminalized, and beaten by guards at Soledad and San Quentin "just because I

want[ed] to be my black self, mentally healthy, and because I look[ed] [at] anyone who

addresse[d] me in the eye."<sup>71</sup> Moreover, he states that because he, Nolen, Drumgo,

Clutchette, and other politically-conscious prisoners "attempted to transform the black

criminal mentality into a black revolutionary mentality... each of us has been subjected to

---

<sup>67</sup> Gregory Armstrong, preface, *Blood in My Eye*, by George L. Jackson (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990): xii.

<sup>68</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 178, 247.

<sup>69</sup> Terry A. Kupers, "Mental Health in Men's Prisons," *Prison Masculinities*, eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 192-197.

<sup>70</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 157.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185.

years of the most vicious reactionary violence by the state.” Routine beatings aside, Jackson spent seven of his ten years of imprisonment in solitary confinement, and confronted guards who frequently destroyed his personal effects, threw human waste in his cell, and pitted him against armed white prisoners purely for their own entertainment.<sup>72</sup>

In order to situate his confrontations with false indictment, political repression, and institutional violence in a racialized historical context, Jackson returns in his later letters to the slave metaphor that he employs at the opening of *Soledad Brother*:

I have felt the sting of the knout...the lash affects me for sure...It affects me...it shocks me somewhere behind the eyes, strains my instinct to survive...I've lived through the [middle] passage, died on the passage, *lain in the unmarked shallow graves of the millions who fertilized Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest*...I feel all that they ever felt, but double. I can't help it; there are too many things to remind me of the 23 ½ hours that I'm in this cell.<sup>73</sup>

Jackson's internalization of the slave's physical and psychological wounding is gripping—and painful. In particular, his sustained attention to “the lash” and the black captive body hearkens back to testimonies of beatings described well over a century ago in slave narratives by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Harriet Jacobs, and Elizabeth Keckley. On the one hand, given the kind of literature that Jackson pored over—texts that chronicled the routine suffering and violently-punished resistance of enslaved persons like W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Philip Foner's *Frederick Douglass: A Biography*, and Herbert Aptheker's *Documentary History of the*

---

<sup>72</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 16, 206, 225-226, 19-20.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 134, 208, 233, 234, 235.

*Negro People in the United States*—the appearance of the brutalized slave in Jackson’s letters is, arguably, quite foreseeable.<sup>74</sup> Yet the racial tension and guard impunity surrounding Jackson’s bodily affliction make his comparisons between his abusive captivity and the common treatment of enslaved persons anything but hyperbole.

I’m arguing that Jackson’s reference here particularly to the slave’s tacit expendability and unattainable restitution—“I’ve...lain in the unmarked shallow graves of millions who fertilized American soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest”—renders comprehensible the profound systemization of his victimization. Prison administrators, after all, frequently labeled Jackson as expendable, as the following Soledad official’s report makes evident: “As we are trying to make room for South Facility inmates, [Jackson] should be considered *expendable* on the basis of his record here and the circumstances of his transfer.”<sup>75</sup> The deposition of white prisoner Allan Mancino reinforces Jackson’s expendability in the eyes of white Soledad prison guards, in particular—men who were committed to Jackson’s extermination by means legal or extralegal: “[Captain Moody]...asked me directly if I would kill George Jackson. He said he did not want another Eldridge Cleaver [here].”<sup>76</sup>

Jackson’s slavery metaphor thus shows us how his and other black prisoners’ encounters with prisoner abuse were carefully calculated. In other words, in Jackson’s narrative framework, contemporary prisoners’ sufferings are not like the slave’s because

---

<sup>74</sup> A San Quentin official’s report to prison warden L.S. Nelson on September 3, 1971 includes the books I have here mentioned among a list of 99 books that were “taken from the cell of George Jackson...following Adjustment Center incident at San Quentin.”

<sup>75</sup> Official qtd. in Min S. Lee, *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison: In Which a Utopian Scheme Turns Bedlam* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1973): 128, emphasis mine.

<sup>76</sup> Mancino qtd. in Eric Mann, *Comrade George: An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972): 55.

of their disturbing brutality. Rather, just as the slave lived and died under the unmediated authority of an owner who would, as Jackson remarks, “hold it in one square yard of the earth’s surface [and]...beat it, work it, fuck it, [and] kill it,” contemporary prison guards also hold the imprisoned “in one spot” where they “beat and maim [and]...murder us and call it justifiable homicide.”<sup>77</sup> I’m arguing that the tacit expendability of the modern prisoner, the use of racial humiliation and violence against imprisoned persons as a social control strategy, and the near-total impunity afforded offending officers recall slavery’s system of violent and unpunishable racial discipline. Thus, especially in the California prison system in which Jackson was tormented, the prevalence of prisoner abuse represented not unprecedented tragedy, but, as Joy James has observed, systematic “annihilation of ‘deviant’ bodies—particularly black bodies in resistance to the prison structure.”<sup>78</sup> This institutional strategy of liquidation is underscored by extensive evidence that reveals Jackson was not alone in his victimization. After excavating prison records, formal inspection reports, the stories of prisoners’ family members, and, of course, prisoners’ own testimonies, outside investigators discovered that *hundreds* of Soledad prisoners confronted guards’ racial slurs, had their food contaminated with glass, urine, and fecal matter, and were coerced into guards’ staging of racial fights.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the public record shows that by cultivating an atmosphere of perpetual violence, confusion, and fear, prisons like Soledad and San Quentin *systematically* purged

---

<sup>77</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 251, 252.

<sup>78</sup> Joy James, *Warfare in the Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 21.

<sup>79</sup> Min S. Lee, *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison: In Which a Utopian Scheme Turns Bedlam* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1973): 134-135.

“deviant” or decidedly expendable black bodies. I contend that Jackson’s ability to frame these regimes of social control in a slave context, as well as his use of slavery as an overarching metaphor for blacks’ economic exploitation and police victimization in free society, profoundly shape Baldwin’s allusion to slavery in the plight faced by *Beale Street*’s abused political prisoner, Fonny Hunt.

## II

I looked around the subway car. It was a little like the drawing I had seen of slave ships. Of course, they hadn’t had newspapers on the slave ships, hadn’t needed them yet; but, as concerned space (and also, perhaps, as concerned intention) the principle was exactly the same.

—Tish from Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*<sup>80</sup>

Fonny used to go to a vocational school where they teach kids to make all kinds of shitty, really useless things, like card tables and hassocks and chests of drawers which nobody’s ever going to buy [...]. They say the kids are dumb and so they’re teaching them to work with their hands. Those kids aren’t dumb. But the people who run these schools want to make sure that they don’t get smart: they are really teaching the kids *to be slaves*. Fonny didn’t go for it at all, and he split, taking most of the wood from the workshop with him.

—Tish from Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*<sup>81</sup>

In Baldwin’s *Beale Street*, as in Jackson’s prison letters, “slave” is anything but a convenient indexical term for unquantifiable black bodily affliction. The word “slave,” which appears in *Beale Street* in the context of racialized social control and economic exploitation, helps readers situate purportedly tragic acts of state violence in the novel in the context of systematic racial harm that, as scholars like Robert Perkinson have shown us, was first institutionalized on the Southern slave plantation.<sup>82</sup> Inspired by Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, Baldwin fundamentally uses the term “slave” in *Beale Street* to register

---

<sup>80</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 114.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36, emphasis mine.

<sup>82</sup> Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: The Rise of America’s Prison Empire* (New York: Picador, 2010): 8.

historical continuities between past and present forms of black economic exploitation. As Azubike Iloeje and Lynn Orilla Scott have revealed in their readings of Baldwin's novel, Tish, "Black, poor, and raised in a public housing project" should be understood as "historicizing the present to suggest the continuity of oppression in black life" when she compares the New York subway—"the poor's mass transit system"—to slave ships.<sup>83</sup> I argue that Tish's use of the word "slave" also informs how she describes her falsely-condemned black boyfriend's encounters with police victimization and prisoner abuse in the novel. Tish's characterization of her lover Fonny as a recalcitrant slave helps her to discuss state violence as a predictable outcome of black resistance to systematic oppression.

In the first section of *Beale Street*, "Troubled About My Soul," Baldwin's narrator Tish describes Fonny's former vocational school as a place where Harlem's disadvantaged adolescents are corralled, ordered around, and taught "to be slaves."<sup>84</sup> Presumed by those who run the school to be "dumb," Fonny and his classmates are instructed to "work with their hands" for hours on end and make "useless things" that "nobody's ever gonna buy."<sup>85</sup> The school, fittingly described by Lynn Orilla Scott as "an institution of social control," is too much for Fonny: Tish comments that "Fonny didn't go for it *at all*."<sup>86</sup> Fonny believes the school is a mere reinforcement of his tacit

---

<sup>83</sup> Azubike Iloeje, "The Dimensions of Captivity in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *Black Culture and Black Consciousness in Literature*, ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Education Books, 1987): 188; Lynn Orilla Scott, *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002): 115-116.

<sup>84</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 36.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>86</sup> Lynn Orilla Scott, *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002): 115; James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 36.

expendability. Already one of those ghetto “kids [who] had been told they weren’t worth shit” from birth, when school administrators make workhorses of Fonny and other impoverished black teens so “they don’t get smart,” Fonny sees them as training him and his peers to continue mindlessly down a path of systematic economic exploitation.<sup>87</sup> Accordingly—to recall Tish’s language—Fonny refuses to be a slave.

As Brady Thomas Heiner and Ariana Mangual have observed, “the school in communities of color [often] functions as a repressive apparatus of the State; it operates to supply bodies to the prison industrial complex [or]...produce subjects [who] will readily accept their exploitation in the economic system.”<sup>88</sup> Incensed by the “repressive apparatus of the State” that his vocational school represents, Fonny drops out—but not without making a radical political statement on his way out the door. During his last week at the school, Fonny steals “most of the wood from the woodshop” in order to begin a career as a craftsman; he tactically resists institutional exploitation by taking from those in power in order to empower himself.<sup>89</sup> While Fonny is not criminalized for this act of theft, the defiance that precipitated it—what Tish calls Fonny’s “passion”—makes him a marked man:

Fonny had found something that he could do, that he wanted to do, and this saved him from the death that was waiting to overtake the children of our age... That same passion which saved Fonny got him into trouble and put him in jail. For, you see, he had found his center, his own center, inside him: and it showed. He wasn’t anybody’s nigger. And that’s a crime, in this...country.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 36.

<sup>88</sup> Brady Thomas Heiner and Ariana Mangual, “The Repressive Social Function of Schools in Racialized Communities,” *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons*, ed. Joy James (New York: Palgrave, 2000): 223, 227.

<sup>89</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 36.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 36, 37.

Fonny's assertion of race pride and self-determination at the school and in a city described as being "in the hands of white men" is in and of itself an offense.<sup>91</sup> Tish, then, is right to inform readers that it would only be a matter of time before Fonny would officially get "into trouble" and wind up "in jail." Like Jackson, the metaphorical fugitive slave who is born into "a captive society" and brought to prison because he can't adjust to a "modern variety of chattel slavery," the more frequently Fonny defies state initiatives to make him into a "slave," the more likely his brutal castigation and the more necessary his being made into an example by the forces of a white supremacist state.<sup>92</sup>

Wrongful incarceration is, in fact, Fonny's exemplary punishment—his most fundamental experience of prisoner abuse. Officer Bell, the police department, the prosecution, the courts, and the prison guards work together, in a disturbingly systematic manner, to ensure that Fonny will fall to his knees before the state and white civil society. In light of Officer Bell's earlier threat to Fonny—"I'm going to fuck you, boy"—Trudier Harris describes the methodical humiliation of Fonny by the state as "symbolic rape," as Bell "us[ing] the system to 'fuck' [Fonny]."<sup>93</sup> Bell launches a rape accusation against Fonny and orchestrates false testimony against him through Mrs. Rogers. Law enforcement officers then make sure that Fonny is the only black male in a police lineup after they hear that Mrs. Rogers was allegedly raped by a young African American man. When word leaks out that Fonny's black friend Daniel has provided the defense with

---

<sup>91</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 65.

<sup>92</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 4, 251.

<sup>93</sup> Trudier Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *MELUS* 5.3 The Pressures of History (1978): 59, 60.

exculpatory evidence, the District Attorney's office indicts Daniel on trumped-up charges and ensures that he is "held incommunicado" and beaten senseless by state prison guards.<sup>94</sup> Then, Fonny's bail is set so high that his impoverished father takes to stealing to get him released, and ultimately commits suicide. Finally, Fonny is singled out for sexual abuse behind bars, and his resistance earns him time in solitary—as well as regular beatings from guards in New York City's Tombs jail.

By novel's end, it's clear that Officer Bell has accused Fonny not because of his genuine concern about Mrs. Rogers's rape but rather because Fonny refused to reply "yes, sir" when Bell called him "boy" in public, and because Fonny shamed him—a white male authority—when the policeman bid him a foreboding farewell. The summation of Fonny's plight by Ernestine, Tish's sharp-tongued older sister, seems right on the money: "If Fonny were white, [there] wouldn't be a case at all."<sup>95</sup> Fonny is made an example of by Bell and the state because—as in the case of the vocational/plantation school—he refuses to be a slave; he refuses to submit to an unwritten law of racialized social control. Fonny's indefinite solitary confinement and jailhouse beatings are thus predictable—not exceptional or coincidental—occurrences. They result from Fonny's fundamental rejection of a system of racial subjugation that was purportedly abolished with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. This is why, near the end of *Beale Street*, Tish relates Fonny's subjection to indefinite solitary confinement in a tone of matter-of-factness: "[Fonny] is not here for anything he has done...Fonny is placed in solitary for refusing to be raped. He loses a tooth, again, and almost loses an eye [...].

---

<sup>94</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 182, 93.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

He is fighting for his life...he [is] so skinny; he [is] so bruised.” For Tish, Fonny’s predicament is saddening, but not at all surprising. In truth, she has told much of the story of Fonny’s plight when she first brings it up on the fourth page of the novel: “He’s very proud...that’s the biggest reason he’s in jail.”<sup>96</sup>

Fonny’s assertion of race pride and self-determination is also the root cause of his routine torment in jail. Like George Jackson, who refused to follow an unwritten racial law of black submissiveness to white supremacist power in free society *and* behind bars, Fonny’s resistance of prison rape is not interpreted as mere self-defense. Rather, his defiance is read by the prison administration as out-and-out noncompliance with their agenda of racialized social control—and thus, grounds for brutalization. As revealed in a tearful testimony offered by Fonny’s black friend Daniel, prison rape—an act which legal scholar Kim Shayo Buchanan identifies as reflecting “institutional actors [who] condone and legitimize sexual abuse”—is indeed a tool of racial humiliation in Baldwin’s novel.<sup>97</sup> A victim of wrongful conviction and prison rape, Daniel implies that the jail staff’s conveniently feigned ignorance of his sexual victimization actually represents a way of reinforcing racial hierarchy behind bars:

They were just playing with me, man, because they could...they can do with you what they want. *Whatever they want*. And they dogs, man. I really found out, in the slammer, what Malcolm [X] and them cats was talking about. The white man’s got to be the devil. He sure ain’t a man...The *worst* thing—is they can make you so fucking *scared*. Scared, man. *Scared*.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 191-192, 193, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Kim Shayo Buchanan, “Our Prisons, Ourselves: Race, Gender, and the Rule of Law,” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 29.1 (2010): 4.

<sup>98</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 103.

Thus, like Jackson, Fonny's resistance to the jail's attempts to break him by any means necessary (including prison rape) leaves him an expendable man facing certain death. Tish's use of the slave metaphor and a matter-of-fact tone in her relation of Fonny's abuse behind bars demonstrates her awareness of Fonny's tacit expendability in the eyes of the law—and, moreover, the disturbing ease with which jail guards can cripple Fonny by novel's end.

The abuse storytelling practices that Baldwin employs through his narrator Tish are thus traceable to Jackson's narrative techniques in *Soledad Brother*. Like Jackson, Tish uses a slave metaphor in order to illustrate the systematic nature of a black man's encounters with economic exploitation, under-education, police victimization, and prisoner abuse. Tish alludes to slavery in order to critique the racial bias in the criminal justice system and reveal the impunity surrounding Fonny's abuse. It's also important to note that Tish is a black woman who is herself victimized by a white policeman. Tish encounters the sexual harassment of Officer Bell when he stalks her and abruptly blocks her path on a city street: "I tried to keep moving, but he was standing in my way...I was suddenly his: a desolation entered me which I had never felt before. I watched his eyes, his moist, boyish, despairing lips, and felt his sex stiffening against me."<sup>99</sup> Tish's relation of Fonny's encounters with police aggression and prisoner abuse is thus empathetic, laden with a pronounced degree of personal connection. With a slave metaphor as her narrative backdrop, Tish teaches us through her recounting of Fonny's plight that the racism and impunity that so frequently surround the performance of state violence on black bodies find their precedent in the institution of slavery. A police harassment victim

---

<sup>99</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 173, 174.

who produces and selectively circulates the story of her and Fonny's abuse experiences, Tish is thus a textual authority. Because she is the author and distributor of her and Fonny's abuse accounts, Tish can do what most state violence victims cannot do: Tish can publically present her own critical thinking on institutionalized abuse. Like Jackson, she conveys to the reading public that she and Fonny are *not* silent sufferers.

In the next and final section of this chapter, I consider the far-reaching implications of scholarship that examines police harassment and prisoner abuse from the perspectives of abuse survivors. Figures like Tish and George Jackson, I argue, represent trailblazers in this project. Their innovative methods of abuse storytelling make evident how the practices of racial profiling and unchecked police aggression anticipate the systematic mistreatment of nonwhite prisoners behind bars. Moreover, Tish and Jackson also show us how victims of state violence use narrative as an instrument for critiquing systemic abuse, reclaiming their bodies, and reimagining the self and community.

## **1.4 Conclusion**

News-media discourse notwithstanding, most narratives on police victimization in the U.S. appear under jaw-dropping titles in human rights literature, such as Amnesty International's 1996 report, *United States of America: Police Brutality and Excessive Force in the New York City Police Department*, Human Rights Watch's 1998 report, *Shielded From Justice: Police Brutality and Accountability in the United States*, and the United Nations' 2007 report, *In the Shadows of Terror: Persistent Police Brutality and Abuses of People of Color in the United States*. On the one hand, the authors of these reports are to be applauded for the urgent, global consciousness-raising work they

perform and inspire. Reconstructing hundreds of stories of state violence from formal investigations and trial records from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, these reporters register the quotidian nature of police misconduct in dozens of U.S. cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit. Moreover, they pay careful attention to the frequent racialization of police aggression, and the larger social implications raised by the near-total impunity afforded law enforcement officers who beat, choke, shoot, torture, and sexually violate alleged criminals. Contemporary human rights reporters provide crucial evidence, in other words, of what Baldwin describes in “Down at the Cross” as the policeman’s oft-unacknowledged racial prejudice and “criminal power”—his frequent exploitation of state-issued authority as a “means of holding Negroes in subjection.”<sup>100</sup>

Consider, for instance, the following passage from an overview chapter in one of Amnesty International’s reports on police brutality:

The overwhelming majority of victims in many areas are members of racial or ethnic minorities, while most police departments remain predominantly white. Relations between the police and members of minority communities—especially young black and Latino males in inner city areas—are often tense, and racial bias is reported or indicated as a factor in many instances of police brutality... The disciplinary sanctions imposed on officers found guilty of brutality are frequently inadequate, and officers are rarely prosecuted for excessive force. The ‘code of silence’—in which officers fail to report brutality or cover up abuses—commands widespread loyalty, contributing to a climate of impunity. Although there has been pressure on police departments to become more publicly accountable in recent years through independent oversight mechanisms, these remain inadequate or wholly absent in many areas.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963): 37.

<sup>101</sup> Amnesty International, *United States of America: Police Brutality and Excessive Force in the New York City Police Department* (London: Amnesty International, 1996): 12, 13.

This excerpt alone demonstrates the level of meticulousness that goes into these justice advocacy reports: racial bias, the lenient punishment of offending officers, the silence of police departments, and the near nonexistence of effective “independent oversight mechanisms” are shown to collectively bring about pervasive police aggression in communities of color. Still, despite the important work that these reports represent, their authors generally focus more on the torment that criminalized people of color face as opposed to the stories of bodily reclamation and self-transformation that they tell. This is not a criticism of these writers as much as it is a recognition of conventions specific to the field of human rights literature. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith discuss in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, human rights reporters often edit down victims’ testimonies and reconstruct them in objectivist third-person in order to make their content appear legitimate, or to establish affective appeal for the abused among prospective justice advocates: “Testimonies can be reduced to forensic evidence, denuded of emotion... excerpted and joined to other excerpts to produce corroborative evidence through de-individualized repetition [or]... placed within ethical and moral frameworks in order to solicit sympathy and understanding.”<sup>102</sup> Quite logically, though, a question arises in relation to the editorial practices of these reporters: what is lost in their translations?

One way of pursuing answers to this important query is to consider what is gained by examining police abuse narratives in literary works—in a medium of representation that is very much invested in getting readers thinking about the interior lives of the

---

<sup>102</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 44.

abused. Works like Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* and Jackson's *Soledad Brother* are especially relevant in this regard. The abuse-surviving narrators of these works, Tish and Jackson, both reveal in their accounts of police harassment something that is understated or entirely omitted in human rights reports on police abuse: racial profiling and unchecked police aggression are practices that are intertwined with the systematic mistreatment of nonwhite prisoners behind bars. By using the slave metaphor to frame, in Tish's case, Fonny's victimization by law enforcement, and in Jackson's case, his own exploitation by police, these *literary* abuse storytellers reveal that disobedience to unwritten racial laws often precedes and predetermines guards' brutalization of black prisoners, and that racialized abuse behind bars finds its precedent in the largely unpunished acts of police brutality that blacks suffer in the free world. Critical examination of these *literary* abuse narratives, then, makes apparent the major interventions that the work of Baldwin and Jackson can make in the critical reception of police abuse victims stories' in human rights literature, since 1) accounts of police and prisoner abuse are generally treated as separate topics of discussion in human rights reports, and 2) very few of accounts in human rights reports situate state violence in a racialized historical context that traces the structural elements of police/prison guard misconduct (i.e., impunity and institutionalized racism) to the institution of slavery.

There is one more illuminating interpretative framework that Baldwin's *Beale Street* offers readers of contemporary reports on state violence. Baldwin's novel shows us that police abuse victims, when positioned as textual authorities, tend to create abuse narratives that do not depict them as they arguably must appear in most human rights reports: as victims, and victims *only*. Baldwin's narrator Tish, for instance, is obviously

harmed by Officer Bell, but her experience of sexual harassment is something she curiously discusses in the space of roughly two paragraphs of a two-hundred-page novel. Tish instead emphasizes the way in which she uses her voice and her mind in order to reclaim her body in this moment. Tish informs readers that she shouted a defiant “I’m not afraid” and “[g]ood-night” to Officer Bell, and then, taking advantage of a “hurrying, crowded twilight avenue,” darted past him. Moreover, Tish tells readers that after dashing out of harm’s way, she sought the safety of her and Fonny’s loft, which she describes elsewhere as a haven in a racially treacherous city. There, Tish reveals, “I “blotted [the harassment experience] out of my mind.”<sup>103</sup>

Positioned as a textual authority, Tish thus refuses to describe herself as a victim only. While Tish does not deny the fact of her victimization, she does not reduce her abuse narrative to the experience of being victimized. Tish is careful to do the same in her relation of Fonny’s encounters with police aggression and prisoner abuse. At the beginning of the novel, she tells readers, “I’m not ashamed of Fonny. If anything, I’m proud. He’s a man. You can tell by the way he’s taken this shit that he’s a man.”<sup>104</sup> Tish concludes the novel by emphasizing how Fonny, whistling as he works on one of his own wood sculptures, remains mentally free despite being routinely beaten by prison guards: “They beat him up, but they didn’t beat him. He’s beautiful.”<sup>105</sup> Moreover, Tish calls attention to how intentionally Fonny defines his personhood even while he is confined to a jail environment where his body is harmed and his attempts at personal development

---

<sup>103</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 174, 173-174.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

are constrained. Specifically, Tish plays up Fonny's decision to read and sketch behind bars, as well as Fonny's jovial and loquacious demeanor when he discusses the size of their unborn child during Tish's jail visits because, in Tish's words, even Fonny's remarking about "the growth of the baby is connected with his determination to be free."<sup>106</sup> Tish thus teaches us the importance of attending to police and prisoner abuse victims as textual authorities. At one level, Tish's use of the slave metaphor is meant to situate her as a critical thinker who is an active participant (not a silent spectator) in the project of human rights advocacy of which she and her boyfriend are protagonists. At another, Tish's demonstration of how her and Fonny's abuse narratives are not reducible to the fact of their routinized victimization wrests them from the objectification of social scientism, and infuses them with the vitality of subjective experience. *If Beale Street Could Talk* can thus be understood as Baldwin's lesson on the significance of literary storytelling in project of social justice advocacy. In the end, *Beale Street* demonstrates that remarkable method of witnessing that Baldwin preached and so regularly practiced throughout his life: "[T]o know how justice is administered in a country...one goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law's protection most!—and listens to their testimony."<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974): 162.

<sup>107</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dial Press, 1972): 149.

## 2. “Unspeakable Thoughts, Unspoken”: Morrison’s *Beloved* and Testimony of Women Prisoners’ Abuse

In *Beloved*, the transactional relationship between carceral spaces situated on opposing sides of the 1865 border underlines a mode of radical counterhistorical theorization within Morrison’s text. That is, the central role of prison spaces vis-à-vis the novel’s overall severing of linear temporality underlines its role as narrative reorientation of occidental penology by way of a nondiachronic, black diasporic timeline—or more properly speaking, a temporal circularity, about which ostensibly obsolete or premodern terror modalities resurface right along with the text’s putatively dead ghost-child.

—Dennis Childs, “‘You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet’: *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix”<sup>1</sup>

The figure of the late twentieth-century U.S. prisoner haunts Toni Morrison’s contemporary narrative of slavery, *Beloved*. Morrison’s 1987 novel does not merely project the unspeakable horrors of American slavery’s past onto a nominally “free” U.S. present. Quite the reverse, the racialized mass incarceration and prisoner abuse so characteristic of our contemporary moment inform Morrison’s disturbing depictions of captive life on the slave ship, plantation, and chain gang camp. For literary scholar Dennis Childs, for instance, the caging of Paul D and the novel’s 45 other black chain gang captives in boxes “five feet deep, five feet wide” registers quite unsettlingly the isolation felt by contemporary prisoners.<sup>2</sup> These prisoners are held in six-by-eight-foot Security Housing Units for 23 ½ hours a day, and, as in Morrison’s novel, they are disproportionately black men. From Childs’s perspective, then, *Beloved* offers us a “forward-haunting”—not only a look *back* at the racialized terror of the chain gang camp, but also a glance *forward* to the prejudicial capture (by way of racial profiling, racially-discriminatory sentencing, racial bias in the courtroom, and the criminalization of

---

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Childs, “‘You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet’: *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix,” *The American Quarterly* 61.2 (2009): 275-276.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 106.

antiestablishment black political activism), brutal entombment, and overpopulation of black bodies in the contemporary prison system.<sup>3</sup>

Since Childs has begun this important work of situating *Beloved* in a prison industrial complex context, I propose a reading of the novel that builds on his framework. I argue that the rape testimonies of enslaved women in Morrison's novel are haunted by contemporary accounts of women prisoners' abuse. *Beloved*, that is to say, is as much a casebook as it is a fiction. This novel that Pamela Barnett describes as "haunted by the history and memory of [institutionalized] rape" was published in 1987—precisely when reports of unpunished sexual abuse in U.S. women's prisons skyrocketed.<sup>4</sup> In 1990, for instance, California's *Orange County Register* disclosed that a male correctional officer who had raped ten women prisoners in the 1980s was eventually fired but never prosecuted.<sup>5</sup> In 1994, a U.S. Department of Justice investigation of two Michigan prisons revealed that "nearly every woman [prisoner] interviewed reported various sexually aggressive acts of guards."<sup>6</sup> Then, in 1996, Human Rights Watch's now widely-referenced report *All Too Familiar: Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. Prisons* uncovered evidence of routine sexual misconduct in women's prisons in California, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and the District of Columbia. Since the release of *All Too Familiar*, accounts demonstrating the prevalence of sexual abuse in the women's prison

---

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Childs, "'You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet': *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix," *The American Quarterly* 61.2 (2009): 271-297.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela E. Barnett, "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*," *PMLA* 112 (1997): 418.

<sup>5</sup> "Abuse: guard not prosecuted for sexual attacks," *Orange County Register*, July 29, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch Women's Project, *All Too Familiar: Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. State Prisons* (Washington, DC: Human Rights Watch, 1996): 236-237.

have surfaced in reports by Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union, Just Detention International, and Grassroots Leadership, in prison and women's studies texts by Cristina Rathbone, Silva J.A. Talvi, Victoria Law, and Jodie Lawston and Ashley Lucas, as well as in prisoner-created media.<sup>7</sup>

This recent scholarly/activist attention to women's and girls' habitual mistreatment in prisons, juvenile facilities, and immigration detention centers coincides with Morrison's attentiveness to the plight of women prisoners. For nearly two decades before publishing *Beloved*, Morrison worked as an editor with Random House, where she edited two well-known women's prison narratives—former political prisoner Angela Davis's autobiography, and Gayl Jones' novel *Eva's Man*. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* chronicles the rough treatment of Davis and other women prisoners at the New York Women's House of Detention; Jones's novel takes as its subject a black woman prisoner's recollections of sexual abuse. Morrison's noted commitment to getting both works in print, her expressed interest in outlaw women, and her sharing the stage

---

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, *Custody and Control: Conditions of Confinement in New York's Juvenile Prisons for Girls* (New York: Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, 2006); Amnesty International, *Broken Bodies, Shattered Minds: Torture and Ill-Treatment of Women* (London: Amnesty International, 2001); Nick Hudson, Bob Lilal and Andrew Strong, "Private Prison Scandals from Texas," *Considering A Private Jail, Prison, or Detention Center?: A Resource for Community Members and Public Officials*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 16 September 2009, 28 December 2010 <<http://www.grassrootsleadership.org/Texas%20resources/CPJ%20Second%20Edition.pdf>>; Silja J.A. Talvi, *Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007); Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009); Jodie Michelle Lawston and Ashley E. Lucas, eds., *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011). See also the following prisoner-created media: *Women + Prison: A Site for Resistance* <<http://www.womenandprison.org/>>; Sharon Daniel's *Public Secrets* <<http://vectors.usc.edu/issues/4/publicsecrets/>>.

with Davis at a 2010 talk on mass incarceration attest to her longstanding concerns surrounding the plight of women prisoners.<sup>8</sup>

Although prisons appear infrequently in Morrison's fiction, when they do show up, they are withdrawn sites where abuse is commonplace. In *Paradise*, a novel Megan Sweeney reads as "drawing attention to the ways in which black women fall prey to the disciplinary forces of both the state and the patriarchal forces of the black community," Morrison's narrator voices frustration about male violence against "unarmed women" in a "prison calling itself a town...a backward noplac ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where."<sup>9</sup> To take another example, the title character in Morrison's *Sula* happens on an equally disturbing turn of phrase: "when the guards have raped all the jailbirds."<sup>10</sup> In *Beloved*, two enslaved women testify of routinized rape on the slave ship, and, in so doing, recast with disturbing precision stories of sexual victimization written by contemporary women prisoners.

---

<sup>8</sup> Regarding outlaw women, Toni Morrison writes: "Outlaw women are fascinating—not always for their behavior, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status is an illegal one from birth if it is not under the rule of men." Toni Morrison, "Foreword," *Sula* (New York: Vintage, 2004): xvi. Regarding Morrison's hand in publishing *Eva's Man*, a 1976 *Esquire* magazine article insinuates that despite Morrison's calling the novel "a considered editorial risk," it was Morrison's individual commitment to getting the manuscript published that led to its distribution in print form. Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): 90. The talk with Davis I refer to is titled, "Angela Davis and Toni Morrison: Literacy, Libraries, and Liberation." It can be accessed at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOAYp8yoVA4>>.

<sup>9</sup> Megan Sweeney, "Racial House, Big House, Home: Contemporary Abolitionism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Meridians, Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism* 4.2 (2004): 43-44; Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Plume, 1997): 308.

<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage, 2004): 145.

In this chapter, I offer a new reading of *Beloved* by situating it in the context of late twentieth-century U.S. prisoner abuse. I argue that the rape testimonies of enslaved women in Morrison's novel are haunted by contemporary accounts of women prisoners' abuse. Drawing from Brenda Smith's legal scholarship and Avery Gordon's concept of haunting as "a way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with," I show how the novel's recurring depiction of rape on slave ships alludes to a condition of gendered punishment that began with the Middle Passage and persists in contemporary women's prisons.<sup>11</sup>

Through the chapter, I am also attentive to how Morrison's characters talk about their encounters with rape on the slave ship—how they testify not only of their sexual victimization, but also of their resistance, bodily reclamation, and community-building strategies. Contemporary novels of slavery like *Beloved*, I believe, can help us reimagine conventional stories of abuse in women's prisons. We frequently encounter such stories in human rights literature published by advocacy organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Because the reporters who write these stories rarely offer the perspectives of abuse survivors, they neglect survivors' important critical thinking about

---

<sup>11</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): xvi; Brenda V. Smith, "Sexual Abuse of Women in United States Prisons: A Modern Corollary of Slavery," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 33 (2006): 571-608. I add that the late twentieth century is not the first moment in U.S. penal history in which women prisoners have been guarded by sexually-exploitative male corrections officers. On the one hand, studies conducted by the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the American Civil Liberties (among others) in the 1990s and 2000s indicate that since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, there has been a sharp rise in *reported* cases of male corrections officers' sexual misconduct in women's prisons. But, as Nicole Hahn Rafter has made clear, decades before female matrons oversaw women's reformatories, women were abused by sexually-exploitative male corrections officers in the male prisons in which they were held. Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women, Prisons, and Social Control* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990).

their abuse experiences. Yet Morrison, by foregrounding enslaved women's testimonies and critiques of sexual violence in *Beloved*, rescues her abuse survivors from such social scientism. Morrison imbues them with the vitality of subjective experience, and challenges us to understand how objectivist accounts of routinized rape might be radically reconceived by attending to abuse survivors' testimonies.

## **2.1 The Contemporary U.S. Women's Prison: A Reinstatement of the Slave Ship Social Order**

Legal scholar Brenda Smith opens her essay on imprisoned women with a very unsettling claim. She writes: "The sexual abuse of women in prison...[is] a more contemporary manifestation of slavery."<sup>12</sup> Smith argues that the unchecked authority that enabled slave masters to rape bondwomen without punishment has been passed down to the contemporary male prison guard. In an ironic twist of women's rights advocacy, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act made it legal for women correctional officers to work in men's prisons *and* for male officers to work in women's prisons. Smith writes:

Male officers working in women's prisons now outnumber their female counterparts...[They] have exploited the prison setting as an opportunity to abuse women prisoners...while there is legal protection...for sexual abuse of women in custody, women prisoners still have little choice about whether to become sexually involved with correctional staff. Like slaves, women prisoners are often wholly dependent upon correctional staff for their lives and livelihoods. Correctional staff, like slave owners, determine the ways in which women will serve their time...so like slaves who lacked freedom of choice, women prisoners must often use their sexuality to negotiate within the prison system.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Brenda V. Smith, "Sexual Abuse of Women in United States Prisons: A Modern Corollary of Slavery" *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 33 (2006): 571.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 576, 582, 586, italics mine. Legal scholar Kim Shayo Buchanan has also chronicled this disturbing practices evolution from the slave plantation in an article titled, "Impunity: Sexual Abuse in Women's Prisons," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 42 (2007): 45-87.

Smith later notes that male officers' employment of sexual abuse as an instrument of repression in women's prisons provides yet another link between the contemporary prison guard and the eighteenth-century slave owner. Yet I would argue that these men's disciplinary use of sexual violence, coupled with their monitoring of the most private aspects of women prisoners' lives makes them more like slave ship captains and crewmembers than "slave owners." Unsupervised as they watch masses of women prisoners undress, shower, sleep, and use the bathroom, unpunished as they control the sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom of these captive women, many of today's male correctional officers reactivate a social control system that stretches back to the earliest middle passages.

As maritime historian Marcus Rediker has observed in his study of the slave ship, sexual abuse was the primary tool captains and crewmen wielded in the interest of establishing order between the enslaved and their keepers. Rediker affirms: "[T]he relationship between sailors and slaves [was] *predicated* on...the rape of women captives."<sup>14</sup> The sexual exploitation of enslaved women was, in fact, a customary form of exemplary punishment on the slave ship. Along these lines, bell hooks has noted that rape was designed "to subdue recalcitrant black women [and]...inspire terror in the psyches of displaced African females."<sup>15</sup> An assertion of European "humanity" against the alleged "nonhumanity" of the African Other, rape on the slave ship also had racial

---

<sup>14</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007): 7, emphasis mine. See also David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 92, 93.

<sup>15</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981): 18.

undertones. Captains and crewmen—who were generally European—used sexual violence as a means of inculcating slave women into a Western social order that insisted African women were “naturally” lascivious (the “Jezebel” stereotype) or recalcitrant (the “Sapphire” stereotype), and thus, in need of sexual domestication.

Rape on the slave ship was thus what activist-scholar Dylan Rodríguez has termed a “*pedagogical and punitive practice*,” because it established order through physical violence and ontological terror. The point of sexual violence was to “‘teach’ and coerce [enslaved African women] into the methods of an incipient global ordering.”<sup>16</sup> Male correctional officers have reinstated this social control system in contemporary women’s prisons. Not only is their use of sexual coercion and violence “a proven technique of discipline and power,” as Angela Davis points out, but it is also racialized punishment—punishment meted out disproportionately against those women prisoners who happen to be black.<sup>17</sup> The sexual victimization of imprisoned women thus serves not only to discipline the woman prisoner, but also to reinforce racist perceptions about the alleged “nature” of the criminal woman.

Moreover, as extensive research has indicated, women prisoners are “considered in law and in social practice an inferior race in and of themselves.”<sup>18</sup> Estelle Freedman, Karlene Faith, and Jodie Lawston have shown how, despite overwhelming evidence to

---

<sup>16</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 233.

<sup>17</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003): 77-8; *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005): 115.

<sup>18</sup> Avery Gordon, “Methodologies of Imprisonment,” *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 651-652.

the contrary, women prisoners are popularly depicted as mental cases, social nonconformists, welfare queens, and drug-addicted prostitutes—as “unruly” and utterly “fallen women.”<sup>19</sup> They are seen as base women whose allegedly “natural” lasciviousness, laziness, irrationality, and/or criminality mark them as less deserving of the legal protection afforded free-world women. But adding racial insult to gendered injury is the fact that the vast majority of today’s imprisoned women are *black* women. As activist-scholar Cassandra Shaylor has observed, black women’s mass presence behind bars and the mass circulation of racist ideas about their “natural” lasciviousness and aggressiveness make them prime targets for in-prison sexual abuse:

Black women are prefigured as aggressive and recalcitrant; guards, therefore, are predisposed to view them this way and discipline them accordingly...racist notions about women are discursively produced outside of, as well as within, the prison system, contributing to a damaging environment, specifically for women of color.<sup>20</sup>

If—as Hortense Spillers has demonstrated so remarkably—African women’s sexual subjection on the slave ship was similarly designed to wound their psyches and demarcate them as “female flesh ungended,” then the routinized rape of contemporary imprisoned women (women who are disproportionately of African descent) situates them in the lineage of the female slave ship captive. U.S. women prisoners, that is to say,

---

<sup>19</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters’ Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981); Karlene Faith, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement and Resistance* (Vancouver: Press Gang Press Publishers, 1993); Jodie Michelle Lawston and Ashley E. Lucas, eds., *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011): 1-17.

<sup>20</sup> Cassandra Shaylor, “‘It’s Like Living in a Black Hole’: Women of Color and Solitary Confinement in the Prison Industrial Complex,” *New England Journal on Criminal and Civil Confinement* 24 (1998): 394-395, 412.

represent a reincarnated “living laboratory” for large-scale, systemic de-gendering practices.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the impunity surrounding the rape of captive women on the slave ship has reemerged in the contemporary women’s prison. Speaking to this point, Joy James has remarked:

Although the Convention Against Torture, which the United States ratified in 1994, defines rape of women in custody by a correctional officer as ‘torture,’ the United States government has engaged in virtually no monitoring of the human rights conditions and situations of imprisoned women.<sup>22</sup>

While male prison employees are legally accountable for acts of sexual misconduct and are threatened with imprisonment or high fines for such acts, most offending officers are politely censured by prison staff or, if they are fired, they are never prosecuted.<sup>23</sup>

Further, as journalist Alan Elsner has made apparent, “many [sexual abuse] grievances filed by women [prisoners] are simply ignored or dismissed,” and prison staff often help to perpetuate guard-on-prisoner rape by ignoring officers’ sexually-explicit remarks to and unauthorized searches on women prisoners.<sup>24</sup> The institutional indifference shown toward the mistreatment of contemporary women prisoners, as well as the frequent

---

<sup>21</sup> Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 68.

<sup>22</sup> Joy James, “Introduction,” *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons*, ed. Joy James (New York: Palgrave, 2000): xi.

<sup>23</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003): 77-8; Silja J.A. Talvi, *Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007): 55; Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009): 68-71.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Elsner, *Gates of Injustice: The Crisis in America’s Prisons* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006): 149; Terry Kupers, “The Role of Misogyny and Homophobia in Prison Sexual Abuse,” *UCLA Women’s Law Journal* 18 (Fall 2010): 107-11. Also, the 1996 Prisoner Litigation Reform Act (PLRA) declares that imprisoned people *may* be granted the right to sue prison personnel only after filing complaints through all levels of a facility’s grievance system—even though that system often demands the involvement of those prison personnel members who have harmed or abused the imprisoned person(s).

placement of guards' sexual misconduct outside of jurisprudence, thus represent a return to the legal sanctions granted to sexually-abusive slave ship captains and crewmen. As Rediker reminds us, "the geographic isolation of the [slave] ship, far from the governing institutions of society, was both a source of and a justification for the captain's swollen powers...the world of the ship was his [...]. The captain had the power to protect the women slaves *if he chose to do so.*"<sup>25</sup> The women's prison is the more contemporary version of this isolated holding space. Its remoteness from the eyes of the judiciary enables male prison employees—as well as prison administrations—to turn a blind eye to both the practice and ethical implications of routinized sexual violence.

Emerging curiously in 1987, Morrison's *Beloved* reveals the extent to which the contemporary women's prison represents a reinstatement of the slave ship social order. *Beloved* is haunted as much by the routinized rape of contemporary women prisoners as it is by the sexual exploitation of nineteenth-century slave women. In fact, if haunting is all that Avery Gordon has said it is—"a way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life...a social violence done in the past [*and*] in the present"—then there is no doubt that *Beloved* is haunted by the slave past *and* the prison present.<sup>26</sup>

Early on in the novel, an enslaved woman named Nan informs readers that she and another African woman were routinely raped—"taken up many times by the crew"—

---

<sup>25</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007): 188, 203, 242, emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): xvi, emphasis mine.

during their transatlantic imprisonment.<sup>27</sup> In a monologue that appears later in the novel, the protagonist, Sethe, listens attentively as her daughter Beloved tells of a rape she endured aboard a different slave ship: “I am going to be in pieces he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there. I drop the food and break into pieces... there is no one to want me to say me my name.”<sup>28</sup> Later, we learn that “ghosts without skin”—white crewmen—“stuck their fingers in [Beloved] and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light.”<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere in the novel, a black woman named Ella, while not held in abusive captivity on a slave ship, is sexually victimized for “more than a year” in a very similar manner: we learn that two white men, a father and a son, “kept her locked in a room for themselves.” Ella, recounting the experience, states: “You couldn’t think up... what them two done to me.”<sup>30</sup> Finally, the narrator often compares the recurring rape of the novel’s free black women with the sexual violence that enslaved African women suffered on slave ships: “Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone... *black women raped by the crew.*”<sup>31</sup> From start to finish, stories of rape in *Beloved* nominally return readers to the slave ship and yet cannot escape allusive association with the everyday terrors of the contemporary women’s prison.

---

<sup>27</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 62.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 241. I am not alone in reading this scene and others in Morrison’s novel as direct references to Sethe’s mother’s and Beloved’s *routine* sexual abuse on the slave ship. See, for instance, Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 96-97.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 180, emphasis mine.

On the one hand, the abuse stories of *Nan* and *Beloved* respond to the absence of enslaved women's accounts of slave ship rape in the historical record. Thanks to conscientiously imaginative work Morrison terms "literary archaeology," *Nan* and *Beloved* can be said to amplify the voices of anonymous African women.<sup>32</sup> *Nan* and *Beloved*'s stories stand in for actual enslaved women's accounts of slave ship rape, which were suppressed by the conventions of an antislavery print culture that did not invite their perspectives on transatlantic life. As the late black feminist critic Barbara Christian observed:

Morrison...is riveted on the use of memory in all her characters' search for self-understanding. Nineteenth-century novelists [and slave narrators] could not be as much concerned with the individual slave as subject as they were with the institution itself. They therefore had to sacrifice the subjectivity, and, therefore, the memory of their characters to an emphasis on the slaveholders and their system.<sup>33</sup>

While Morrison's attention to *Nan* and *Beloved*'s interior lives certainly offers readers new ways of imagining enslaved women's experiences on the slave ship, *Nan* and *Beloved* also, in their moments of abuse testimony, emblemize the abuse storytelling practices of contemporary women prisoners. As we shall see in the next section, the narrative techniques that *Nan* and *Beloved* employ in *Beloved* anticipate strategies that imprisoned women have appropriated in order to circumvent conventions in contemporary critical discourse that exclude their perspectives on prison sexual violence.

---

<sup>32</sup> Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: New York Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990): 299-305.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Christian, "Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something: African American Women's Historical Novels," *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 333.

## 2.2 *Beloved* & Prisoner Abuse Testimony

Before recounting their abuse experiences, Nan and Beloved congregate among female kin, choosing to “steal away” from male overseers, plantation duties, and black men in their community. By calling Nan and Beloved’s actions “stealing away,” I am equating them with actual slaves’ flights from plantation life to attend praise meetings, quilting parties, and dances—flights that were, in fact, acts of resistance. As Saidiya Hartman reminds us in *Scenes of Subjection*: “‘Stealing away’ . . . encompassed an assortment of popular illegalities focused on contesting the authority of the slave-owning class and contravening the status of the enslaved as possession.”<sup>34</sup> Nan “steals away” from her plantation duties so she can talk with young Sethe about her birth, and also about enslaved women’s routine victimization on the slave ship. She does not share her experiences with Sethe until she is sure that she and Sethe are all alone.<sup>35</sup> Later in the novel, Sethe’s daughter Beloved also remains selectively silent about her rape on the slave ship. She does not open up about this experience until her mother Sethe enters their house on 124 Bluestone Road, locks the door “tight behind her,” and Stamp Paid—a black male visitor from the neighboring Cincinnati community—“abandon[s] his efforts to see about Sethe.”<sup>36</sup> It is only when Beloved, Sethe, and Beloved’s sister Denver succeed in “stealing away” from a male gaze that Beloved decides to talk freely about her experiences on the slave ship: “When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free

---

<sup>34</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 66.

<sup>35</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 62.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds.”<sup>37</sup>

As they maneuver past prison surveillance systems and censorship policies in order to write and circulate zine writings on prisoner abuse, contemporary women prisoners “steal away” in a manner quite similar to *Nan and Beloved*. While zines have always been inexpensively-produced, “self-published, self-assembled booklets that reflect the whims and desires of the person putting them together,” Danielle Maestretti reminds us that

in the case of prisoner zines, that usually means giving men and women behind bars a voice, and a lifeline to their peers and the outside world. [Zines are] typically distributed to and read by prisoners themselves, but a handful of copies find their way to prison activists, legal professionals, and members of the alternative media.<sup>38</sup>

When imprisoned women self-publish accounts of sexual violence and clandestinely circulate them from prison to prison—and thus “speak” as a critically-thinking collective—they very consciously utilize zine-writing as a means of transforming terrains of punishment *and* themselves. Like slaves’ forbidden flights from the plantation, women prisoners’ collaborative involvement in zine production and distribution represents an act of resistance, and, more fundamentally, a rejection of their institutional status. It should thus come as no surprise that prison administrations often place women prisoners who create, circulate, or receive zines in solitary confinement. Not only is inmate-to-inmate correspondence illegal in most states, but prison administrations are

---

<sup>37</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 199.

<sup>38</sup> Danielle Maestretti, “Breaking Free: Prisoners Publish Their Stories in Zines,” *Utne Reader*, March-April 2010 <<http://www.utne.com/Media/Breaking-Free-Prisoners-Publish-Their-Stories-in-Zines.aspx>>.

well aware that the content in prisoner zines, which often includes explicit stories about guard misconduct, can be produced as evidence of prisoner abuse. Further, as Victoria Law has observed, “in some instances, merely the fact that women [prisoners] are able to have their words printed is seen as threatening [to prison administrations].”<sup>39</sup> Women prisoners who covertly correspond about their sexual victimization through zine-writing thus utilize a narrative technique analogous to the “stealing away” accomplished by Nan, Beloved, and their female kin.

Nan and Beloved also tell their abuse stories in a form that parallels the one used by contemporary women prisoners in their abuse narratives: *testimony*. As historian Danielle McGuire has discussed, testimony is a form of in-group truth-telling that black women, in particular, have utilized since slavery to protest sexual exploitation and reclaim their bodies.<sup>40</sup> Further, as black expressive culture scholar Geneva Smitherman reminds us: “To testify is to tell the truth through ‘story’...testifying...is not plain and simple commentary, but dramatic narration and a communal reenactment of one’s feelings and experiences. Thus, one’s humanity is reaffirmed by the group and...her sense of isolation diminished.”<sup>41</sup> The stories of abuse shared among Morrison’s enslaved women and contemporary women prisoners are testimonies in the senses that both McGuire and Smitherman outline. These abuse stories—which I will refer to hereafter as

---

<sup>39</sup> Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2009): 139.

<sup>40</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010): xvii-xx, 218-220.

<sup>41</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin’ and Testifyin’: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977): 150.

*prisoner abuse testimonies*—are *not* narratives of victimization. On the contrary, prisoner abuse testimonies are accounts of routinized sexual violence that demonstrate the authorial control of women abuse survivors, emphasizing their assertions of (1) bodily reclamation and (2) clandestine community, as well as (3) their discussions of how their encounters with routinized abuse function within an overarching system of dehumanization. In the sections that follow, I trace the development of prisoner abuse testimonies in *Beloved* and in articles from contemporary women prisoners' zines.

## I

Nan's recollection of her life on a slave ship in the sixth chapter of *Beloved* offers us an important first example of prisoner abuse testimony:

'Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe,' and [Nan] did that. [Nan] told her that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. 'She threw them all away but you,' [Nan said]. 'The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe.'<sup>42</sup>

Nan's testimony is clearly one that she repeatedly calls her own ("I am telling"). It is also one that, as I mentioned earlier, Nan shares very selectively. Nan frames her testimony as an important chapter in young Sethe's family history, and accordingly, imparts it *only* to Sethe ("I am telling *you*, small girl Sethe"), who, following the untimely death of her mother, claims Nan as her surrogate mother: "Nan was the one [Sethe] knew best, who was around all day."<sup>43</sup> By establishing herself as sole textual

---

<sup>42</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 62.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

authority over the abuse story she tells, and by circumscribing the range of her listening audience, Nan is able to genuinely testify—“to tell the truth through ‘story,’” as Smitherman would have it. Nan tells the abuse story she wants to tell *how* she wants to tell it and *to whom* she wants to tell it.

In contradistinction to the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition that scholars such as James Olney, John Sekora, William Andrews, and Molly Abel Travis have discussed so insightfully, no white amanuensis must authenticate Nan’s abuse testimony. Nan “tell[s] a free story” because, in the realm of Morrisonian “literary archaeology,” she is able to speak candidly about the severity of sexual violence—and the reality of enslaved women’s resistance to it. Nan’s story is not at all subject to abolitionist print culture’s stifling conventions, conventions which called for “black messages” to be packaged in “white envelopes,” and which prohibited explicit discussions of enslaved women’s rape.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Nan’s testimony reads nothing like the description of sexual violence that white abolitionist John Newton includes in his 1788 pamphlet, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*:

When the [African] women and girls are taken on board a ship, naked, trembling, terrified, perhaps almost exhausted with cold, fatigue, and hunger, they are often exposed to the wanton rudeness of white savages. *The poor creatures cannot understand the language they hear, but the looks and manners of the speakers are sufficiently intelligible...*[Their] resistance or refusal would be utterly in vain, [for] even the solicitation of [their] consent is seldom thought of.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> James Olney, “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography, and Literature,” *The Slave’s Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): 152-153; John Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” *Callaloo* 32 (Summer 1987): 482-515; William Andrews, “The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative,” *PMLA* 105 (1990): 23; Molly Abel Travis, “Speaking from the Silence of the Slave Narrative: *Beloved* and African-American Women’s History,” *Texas Review* 13 (1992): 73.

<sup>45</sup> Newton qtd. in Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007): 241.

Unlike Newton's pamphlet, Nan's story contains what I have identified as the two most defining elements of prisoner abuse testimony: assertions of bodily reclamation and clandestine community. Perhaps the most important and complicated details of Nan's testimony are those that underscore Sethe's mother's assertions of bodily reclamation. On the one hand, Nan does not shy away from acknowledging the fact of routinized rape on the slave ship. She remarks that she and Sethe's mother were *both* "taken up *many* times by the crew." Yet Nan's attention to the regularity of such abuse does not cause her to make it the focus of the narrative. Nan reserves but nine words to talk about the severity of her rape and the rape of Sethe's mother. She instead emphasizes their resistance. For instance, when she speaks of Sethe's mother, she tells young Sethe: "*She threw* them all away but you [Sethe]. The one from the crew *she threw* away on the island. The others from more whites *she also threw* away. Without names, *she threw* them." Four times in Nan's short testimony, Sethe's mother is not, as could be syntactically anticipated, a sentence's direct object. She is, rather, the subject. In other words, readers discover not only the harm that was done to Sethe's mother, but also what Sethe's mother did as a result of being harmed. As Claudine Raynaud has noted in her examination of this passage, "[r]epetitions abound, language stutters, meaning hides, appears, against a tragic compulsive gesture of rejection."<sup>46</sup> Nan depicts Sethe's mother as one who repeatedly "did *not* put her arms around" her sexual aggressors—"Never. Never."

---

<sup>46</sup> Claudine Raynaud, "The Poetics of Abjection in *Beloved*," *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, eds. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 74.

Now I add here that, given Nan's unsettling attention to infanticide as a viable resistance strategy, it is very reasonable to understand the decision of Sethe's mother to throw the babies she bears overboard as being far more destructive than defiant. Yet we must remember that Nan also emphasizes the affections that Sethe's mother offers to an *African* man who fathers a child she *does* name. Through this careful juxtaposition, Nan helps us understand infanticide as a desperate and somewhat contradictory assertion of bodily reclamation and motherlove on the slave ship. From Nan's vantage point, in other words, infanticide represents an enslaved woman's last-ditch efforts at demonstrating a measure of reproductive freedom in a regime premised on her sexual subjection. Infanticide is a way Sethe's mother responds to a condition described by feminist theorist Bibi Bakare-Yusuf as "the violent subjection of the slave[-woman]...into an entity that could produce and reproduce the property necessary for accumulating [white] wealth."<sup>47</sup>

Nan's story is also what I've termed a prisoner abuse testimony because it foregrounds assertions of clandestine community that she and Sethe's mother make while on the slave ship. Even as Nan begins her narrative, she refuses to impart to young Sethe an image of herself or Sethe's mother as isolated victims. She leaves out of her story's introduction the fact that brutal kidnap, separation, and captivity precede the relationship that she cultivates with Sethe's mother. Nan instead begins her testimony with the emboldening observation that she and Sethe's mother were "*together* from the sea." Nan

---

<sup>47</sup> Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror," *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999): 318. Also relevant here is a similar observation made by Anne C. Bailey: "The termination of unwanted pregnancies by slave women was also viewed by some [as] an act of defiance, as they thereby deprived the master of yet another child born into slavery." Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005): 98.

emphasizes how, in other words, her and Sethe's interpersonal bond eclipsed the bodily bonds, natal alienation, and sexually-abusive social order that they were made to endure in the transatlantic. Unlike the sufferers represented in Newton's pamphlet, enslaved women's experiences on the slave ship that Nan describes include but are not reducible to routinized rape. From Nan's narrative viewpoint, African women on the slave ship are not to be remembered as victims only. In Nan's memory, they show up as longtime friends ("[Nan] told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together *from the sea*."), tender lovers of black men ("She put her arms around [the black man]."), and proud mothers ("Without names, she threw [the rape babies]. You she gave the name of the black man...I am telling you, small girl Sethe.").

These images of bonding alone demonstrate the power of Nan and Sethe's mother's clandestine community. But Nan's way of phrasing such bonding also merits close examination. Nan's phraseology—"together from the sea"—testifies that she and Sethe's mother have unexpectedly succeeded in establishing solidarity in a regime designed to isolate them. Nan's and Sethe's formation of a friendship on a ship full of strangers (strangers whose kidnap from various regions of West Africa, I add, likely means that they do not speak the same language), as well as their preservation of such companionship in a setting whose landlessness, historian Stephanie Smallwood reminds us, "did not figure in precolonial West African societies as a domain of human activity," are revolutionary accomplishments.<sup>48</sup> Nan's careful choice of words—"together from the sea"—reveals that in a foreign maritime environment aimed at "reduc[ing] African captives to an existence so physically atomized as to silence all but the most elemental

---

<sup>48</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 124.

bodily articulation, so socially impoverished as to threaten annihilation of the self [and] the disintegration of personhood,” Nan and Sethe’s mother found ways to stay “together.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, even Nan’s phrasing emphasizes the existence of enslaved women’s solidarity on the slave ship.

Nan’s emphasis on the love that Sethe’s mother offers to Sethe’s father provides us with another powerful example of what I’ve called clandestine community. Nearing the conclusion of her testimony, Nan revels in the intimacies shared between Sethe’s mother and an enslaved African man on the slave ship: “You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others (the white crewmembers) she did not put her arms around.” Here, Nan juxtaposes the tender embraces Sethe’s mother offers to Sethe’s father against the complete absence of affection that she shows towards the white crewmen and, in so doing, stresses the fact of Sethe’s mother’s resistance to routinized rape. Nan’s attention to the lovemaking of Sethe’s parents garners additional political significance when placed into historical context. As historian Deborah Gray White has observed, enslaved women “did not generally travel the middle passages in the holds of slave ships but took the dreaded journey on the quarter deck.”<sup>50</sup> Further, unlike the enslaved men, who were usually bound and stowed away for hours on end in the cargo hold, women captives made their trip across the Atlantic unshackled—but only so that they would be “easily accessible to the criminal whims and sexual desires of [white]

---

<sup>49</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007):125.

<sup>50</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985): 63.

seamen.”<sup>51</sup> Given the strictness of this gendered isolation, the fact that Sethe’s mother and father even managed to make love on the slave ship is a revolutionary accomplishment. Nan’s emphasis on their embraces, then, is her way of celebrating their establishment of clandestine, forbidden community in a regime premised on the complete separation of African men and women.

So while Nan does not dismiss the reality of routinized rape on the slave ship, her testimony offers young Sethe (and readers) images of abused slave women that picture them as survivors and resisters who relate to one another as friends, lovers, and mothers. It is thus no surprise that as an adult, Sethe cannot forget Nan’s story, and passes it on to her daughters, Beloved and Denver. Nan’s abuse testimony affirms the togetherness of Sethe’s mother and Nan even as it protests the abusive conditions that brought such togetherness into being.

Before I examine a second account of rape on board a slave ship in *Beloved*, I will consider how the political sensibilities reflected in Nan’s testimony parallel those expressed in a testimony offered in the pages of a contemporary women prisoner’s zine.

## II

Barrilee Bannister is one of the founders and co-editors of the incarcerated women’s zine, *Tenacious: Art and Writings from Women in Prison*, and a woman who was imprisoned at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Oregon. Bannister also organizes against prisoner abuse. After she was sent to a *men’s* private prison in Arizona,

---

<sup>51</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985):63.

where she was denied food until she “consented” to perform oral sex on a male corrections officer, Bannister organized the other 77 women who had suffered sexual harassment and assault from male guards at the prison, “contacted the media and launched a lawsuit, which resulted in [her and the other women prisoners’] return to Oregon, a public apology and the firing and disciplining of many of the involved guards.”<sup>52</sup> Bannister describes her writings in the *Tenacious* zine as follows: “Writing [for *Tenacious*] is my way to escape the confines of prison and the debilitating ailments of prison life. It’s me putting on boxing gloves and stepping into the rink of freedom of speech and opinion.”<sup>53</sup>

Bannister’s association of her counterpublic practice of zine-writing with public prizefighting (“[Zine-]writing is my way to escape the confines of prison [by]...stepping into the rink of freedom of speech and opinion”) brings us back to Smitherman’s base definition of testimonial performance as “dramatic narration and a communal reenactment of one’s feelings and experiences.” Bannister’s observation, in other words, helps us understand how for women prisoners, the practice of zine-writing represents, as with Nan and Beloved’s “stealing away” from plantation overseers and black men to engage in oral testimony with their female kin, a personal and political act. Bannister’s observation thus offers us an important conceptual backdrop for the following prisoner abuse testimony, which was submitted to *Tenacious* by Ms. Marianne Brown:

---

<sup>52</sup> Victoria Law, *Invisibility of Women Prisoner Resistance* <<http://zinelibrary.info/files/invisibility%20of%20women%20prisoner%20resist%20zine%20FINAL.pdf>>, p. 7; <[http://womenandprison.org/contributors/view/barrilee\\_banniste/](http://womenandprison.org/contributors/view/barrilee_banniste/)>.

<sup>53</sup> Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009): 141.

## Making History inside Prison Walls

Around the year 1993 or 1994, me and my Christian sisters in the maximum-security compound of Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women (EMCFW) began to pray about several injustices being done to prisoners by the government. The New Jersey State Department of Corrections no longer works at correcting the problems. Though we are in a ‘correctional facility,’ it is run as a penal institution to punish and harass and oppress... We have witnessed and endured here a lot of abusive authority, power issues... I have seen unnecessary physical violence towards the women in this place. Thank God I was not one of their victims. My Christian sisters and myself would meet three to five days a week, sometimes in the yard, sometimes in the game room to study God’s word, pray, talk about [these] issues and to be of one mind in prayer... Abusive authority—verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuse instead of the proper positive authoritative power [are often] used... When an officer gets into trouble, if there are no pending charges, instead of firing them, they are transferred to a different location and promoted. Who does that? The government with all their corrupt-cover ups! Before being an inmate myself, I would have never believed all of this! Then, in 1998, we knew God was moving and beginning to clear out some of the corruption in the prison system. State correctional officers were getting fired, transferred, sent to rehabs and even given jail time. Some of those who believed they were above the law and untouchable now were humbled by God... A lot of officers were having sexual relations with inmates. One female inmate, after giving an officer oral sex, went and spit out his semen in a plastic bag and mailed it out. Well, his DNA he couldn’t deny and he was gone fast!<sup>54</sup>

It is telling that Ms. Brown begins her abuse testimony like Nan begins hers. From her first sentence, Ms. Brown rejects the identity of an isolated victim. Her opening statement informs *Tenacious* readers that they will not be reading a story about a victimized woman prisoner, but rather one that follows the path of “me and my Christian sisters.” Just as Nan introduces her testimony with the declaration that she and Sethe’s mother were “together from the sea,” Ms. Brown begins her abuse story by emphasizing the strength of her personal relationships. Ms. Brown’s testimony reveals, in fact, that it was her connection with “Christian sisters” that inspired her to organize against guard misconduct at EMCFW: “My Christian sisters and myself would meet three to five days

---

<sup>54</sup> Marianne Brown, “Making History inside Prison Walls,” *Tenacious* 21 (Fall 2010): 11-12.

a week, sometimes in the yard, sometimes in the game room to study God’s word, pray, talk about [these] issues and to be of one mind in prayer.” Such comradeship is no small feat in a women’s prison regime described by former political prisoner Angela Davis as having been “designed to break human beings, [designed] to convert the population into specimens in a zoo [who are] obedient to...keepers, but dangerous to each other.”<sup>55</sup>

Further, when we remember that Ms. Brown’s “Making History inside Prison Walls” is an article in a prisoner zine and thus distributed mostly among imprisoned women, the language surrounding her acknowledgement of solidarity with other EMCFW prisoners conveys subtle defiance. As with Nan’s careful phrasing of her and Sethe’s mother’s unforeseeable friendship in their maritime prison, Ms. Brown’s word choices—“me and my Christian sisters *in the maximum-security compound*”—reinforce the fact that she and other EMCFW prisoners have undermined the institution’s attempts at prisoner isolation. Moreover, Ms. Brown’s testimony models for her larger women prisoner audience the radical outcomes of establishing clandestine community in prison. By situating her observation that “state correctional officers were getting fired, transferred, sent to rehabs and even given jail time” as the end result of her and other women prisoners’ corporate prayer and resistance strategizing (“My Christian sisters and myself would meet three to five days a week....to study God’s word, pray, talk about [these] issues and to be of one mind in prayer.”), Ms. Brown shows women prisoners across the nation that their commitment to unite and organize against sexual abuse can eliminate offending officers and ameliorate living conditions where they are imprisoned.

---

<sup>55</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1974): 52.

Ms. Brown's testimony is thus what scholar and prison instructor Anne Folwell Stanford might call

dangerous because it proclaims a making and remaking of selves despite state attempts to confine, fix, and stabilize identities as 'inmates.' It is also dangerous because it proclaims a 'we' within the confines of the razor wire and disrupts the individualistic discourse and practice on which any system of oppression depends.<sup>56</sup>

Ms. Brown's testimony also resonates with Nan's in that it focuses mostly on abuse survivors' acts of bodily reclamation. In line with the nine words that Nan reserves to describe her and Sethe's mother's repeated rapes by white crewmembers on the slave ship—"both were taken up many times by the crew"—Ms. Brown limits her discussion of male officers' abuse of women prisoners to three brief and intentionally vague sentences: "We have witnessed and endured here a lot of abusive authority, power issues...I have seen unnecessary physical violence towards the women in this place...Abusive authority—verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuse instead of the proper positive authoritative power [are often] used." Ms. Brown's restraint here both honors the privacy of the abused and keeps her testimony's focus on women prisoners' resistance. Moreover, Ms. Brown reveals that for years—at least from "1993 or 1994," when Ms. Brown and "her Christian sisters began to pray about several injustices being done to prisoners by the government" until 1998, when "state correctional officers were getting fired, transferred, sent to rehabs and even given jail time"—women prisoners at EMCFW *regularly* met to strategize against their and other imprisoned women's

---

<sup>56</sup> Anne Folwell Stanford, "Lit by Each Other's Light: Women's Writing at Cook County Jail," *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States*, eds. Paula C. Johnson, Martha L. Raimon, Tina Reynolds, and Ruby C. Tapia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010): 165.

routinized abuse. For “three to five days [each] week,” they came together clandestinely—“sometimes in the yard, sometimes in the game room”—in order to map out ways that they could reclaim their bodies.

Ms. Brown also draws attention to actions that individual EMCFW women prisoners have taken against their sexual aggressors. Specifically, she reveals how one imprisoned woman confiscates the semen of the male officer who coerced her into oral sex, mails it in a plastic bag to a sympathetic outsider, and ultimately brings about his relocation. Ms. Brown’s phrasing in this portion of her testimony is congratulatory, insistent on picturing a victimized woman prisoner as having at least temporarily succeeded in resisting her victimizer: “Well, his DNA he couldn’t deny and he was gone fast!” Ms. Brown’s abuse testimony thus exemplifies what I’ve called prisoner abuse testimony because it emphasizes abused women prisoners’ assertions of clandestine community and bodily reclamation.

I turn my attention now to a second abuse testimony in Morrison’s *Beloved*, one given by the novel’s title character, Beloved. Throughout my reading of this testimony, it is important to note that Morrison imagines Beloved not as a reincarnated bondswoman but rather as “another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh...a survivor from a true, factual slave ship.”<sup>57</sup> Building on an interpretive framework developed by Carol E. Henderson, I read Beloved’s account of rape on the slave ship as at once personal and representative:

In making Beloved *flesh*, Morrison makes [a] historical moment *tangible* as Beloved’s physical frame becomes a material symbol of those bodies unaccounted for—those [epigraphic] sixty million or more lost on various sea voyages between

---

<sup>57</sup> Toni Morrison qtd. in Marsha Darling, “In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” *Women’s Review of Books* 5 (March 1988): 5.

Africa and America. [Beloved] is the conduit through which these disembodied victims of the Middle Passage gain a literate voice.<sup>58</sup>

### III

In the twenty-second chapter of *Beloved*, Beloved offers an abuse testimony that appears in unevenly-spaced sentences hammered out without the pause of punctuation:

I am standing in the rain falling the others are taken I am not taken  
I am falling like the rain is I watch him eat inside I am crouching to  
keep from falling with the rain I am going to be in pieces  
he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there I drop the food and  
break into pieces...there is no one to want me to say me my name.<sup>59</sup>

Beloved's splintered syntax—"he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there I drop the food and break into pieces"—evinces the pain and degradation of routinized rape on the slave ship. "he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there" becomes detectable as an expression of rape not through the elusive language in this passage, but rather through a more explicit reference later in the novel: "[Beloved] said when she cried there was no one. That...ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light."<sup>60</sup> On the one hand, Beloved's refusal to formally classify her rape in Chapter 22 as such implies the insufficiency of everyday speech to register the full impact of such bodily violation. Yet Beloved need not utter the word "rape" in her abuse testimony because she articulates with disturbing precision the effects of routinized rape—physical pain and psychic agony ("I drop the food and break into pieces...there is no one to want me to say me my name"). Beloved's reflexes are impaired ("I drop the

---

<sup>58</sup> Carole E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002): 89.

<sup>59</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 212.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

food”), her body aches (“I...break into pieces”), and her name has been sullied (“there is no one to want me to say me my name”). Further, Beloved’s use of the present tense—her care in stating not “he hurt where I sleep he put his finger there” but “he *hurts* where I sleep he *puts* his finger there”—indicates the frequency of her sexual abuse on the slave ship. Indeed, as Pamela Barnett has discussed in her reading of *Beloved*, rape is “a process by which some white men keep some black women...in a state of fear.”<sup>61</sup>

It’s worth noting, however, that Beloved’s attention to her sexual victimization does not constitute the whole of her abuse testimony. It doesn’t even frame it. As with Nan’s and Ms. Brown’s prisoner abuse testimonies, Beloved does not open hers with any reference to victimization. She begins instead, by expressing her authorial control: “I AM BELOVED.”<sup>62</sup> This is the only phrase that appears in caps in Beloved’s entire testimony. As with Nan’s early-narrative emphasis on the “together[ness]” of her and Sethe’s mother “from the sea,” as with Ms. Brown’s opening-sentence focus on the solidarity of “me and my Christian sisters in the maximum-security compound,” Beloved’s emphasis on her name in her introductory phrase—a name synonymous with “dearly loved,” “dearest,” “adored,” “treasured,” “cherished,” “admired,” and “revered”—reinforces the strength of her personal relationships and thus points to a method by which she reclaims her abused body. In the two chapters preceding her testimony—chapters in which Beloved’s mother, Sethe, and sister, Denver, offer testimonies of their own—the opening words are “BELOVED, she my daughter,” and

---

<sup>61</sup> Pamela E. Barnett, “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*,” *PMLA* 112 (1997): 425.

<sup>62</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 210.

“BELOVED is my sister.”<sup>63</sup> In both chapters, “BELOVED” is the only word to appear in all caps. Thus, Beloved’s emphatic restating of her name—“I AM BELOVED”—reminds her listeners that in spite of her routine victimization on the slave ship, her identity cannot be reduced to that of a victim. Although rape understandably left Beloved feeling as though “there [wa]s no one to want her” or “say [her] name,” Beloved’s phrasing in her testimony’s introduction bespeaks a fundamental belief that she is dearly loved, cherished, and desired by her mother and sister—that her body and personhood are, in fact, hers to reclaim.

Beloved also arranges her abuse testimony so that her affirmations of clandestine community eclipse her relatively brief acknowledgement of sexual victimization. On the one hand, Beloved acknowledges the ubiquity of death on the slave ship: “it is hard making yourself die forever...those able to die are in a pile...they fall into the sea...they are floating on the water.”<sup>64</sup> On the other, Beloved chooses her words as carefully as Nan did when she reserved but nine words in her recollection of rape on the slave ship (“both were taken up many times by the crew”). Beloved spends the majority of her testimony offering a kind of eulogy for a fellow sufferer who she refers to as “my own dead man.” Beloved’s eulogistic tangent is—in comparison to her four-phrase account of rape—quite lengthy.

his teeth are pretty white points...he is fighting hard to leave his body which is a small bird trembling there is no room to tremble so he is not able to die my own dead man is pulled away from my face I miss his pretty white points...I love him because he has a song when he turned around to die I see the teeth

---

<sup>63</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 200, 205.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 210, 211, 212.

he sang through his singing was soft...he locks his eyes and dies on my face...there is no breath coming from his mouth and the place where breath should be is sweet-smelling the others do not know he is dead I know his song is gone now I love his pretty white teeth instead.<sup>65</sup>

From a historical perspective, one must remember that, as Stephanie Smallwood has observed, enslaved men and women on the slave ship had to face “the trauma of death, and the inability to respond appropriately to death.”<sup>66</sup> Slave ship captains generally kept the enslaved from performing any ceremonial practices related to the passing of their kin, using force when necessary.<sup>67</sup> Often crewmembers would hurl these dead bodies overboard like pieces of trash. When placed into this context, Beloved’s possessive reference, “my own dead man,” as well as her drawn-out remembrances of this African man (“I miss his pretty white points...I love him because he has a song when he turned around to die I see the teeth he sang through his singing was soft”) are not only moving actions; they are insurrectionary declarations of clandestine community. Beloved, mentally admiring the teeth, stature, resistance, song, and humanity of a perishing African man, succeeds in memorializing him while he and she are stranded on a ship that prohibits end-of-life ceremonial practices.

Beloved’s clandestine performance of a ceremony that she and her captive counterparts were forcibly kept from practicing reminds her listening female kin (and readers) that her abuse story is not reducible to the fact of her victimization. While the

---

<sup>65</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 210, 211, 212.

<sup>66</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 152.

<sup>67</sup> For a notable exception, please see Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *The American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 1231-1249.

quasi-eulogy that *Beloved* offers “her own dead man” in no way dismisses the reality of her routinized rape, it does demonstrate how *Beloved*’s unforeseeable connection with a fellow sufferer interrupted that reality. *Beloved*’s recollection of her experiences on the slave ship in Chapter 22 of *Beloved* thus represents a shining example of what I’ve called prisoner abuse testimony. *Beloved* demonstrates authorial control as she recounts the routine nature of her rape as well as her assertions of bodily reclamation and clandestine community amid such sexual violence.

*Beloved* also illustrates an element of prisoner abuse testimony that I’ve yet to discuss in an example: an abuse survivor’s discussion of how her victimization functions within an overarching system of dehumanization. *Beloved* takes great pains to indicate how routinized rape represented but one manifestation of bodily debasement that she and other enslaved Africans suffered in a floating dungeon. She reveals that she and other captives were also forced to imbibe the urine of white crewmembers (“men without skin” is *Beloved*’s way of describing white crewmembers), and were subjected to the relentless attacks of ship rats while being bound in cramped spaces: “the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink...small rats do not wait for us to sleep...we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs.”<sup>68</sup> Mistreatment of Africans was so pervasive that *Beloved* later insists, “we are all trying to leave our bodies behind.”<sup>69</sup>

*Beloved*’s latter statement expresses her understanding of the central objective of the slave ship regime: bodily deprivation. As Smallwood reminds us, on the slave ship,

---

<sup>68</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987): 210.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 210.

harm and injury were disciplinary instruments that captains and crewmen used to ensure that “an African body [would become] fully alienated and available for exploitation in the American marketplace.”<sup>70</sup> “We are all trying to leave our bodies behind,” in other words, bespeaks *Beloved*’s awareness that her rapes, forced urine intake, and exposure to scavenging rats were very calculated acts, acts designed not simply to torment her but also to render her body serviceable to the institution of slavery. Indeed, *Beloved*’s use of the present tense as she describes these terrors, as well as her employment of understatement—her refusal to use words that might register the harm inflicted on Africans as the tragic violations they were—hint at their everydayness, and thus unremarkability. *Beloved* thus depicts rape on the slave ship not as an isolated incident, but as a predictable outcome living as a captive in a system premised on dehumanization. In so doing, she demonstrates how abuse survivors, when positioned as textual authorities, demonstrate profound critical thinking on the cause and effect of their victimization.

#### IV

An abuse testimony resonating with both the extreme victimization and political sensibilities expressed in *Beloved*’s appears in the pages of *The Fire Inside*, the newsletter of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners. Though *Fire Inside* writers are mostly imprisoned women, the newsletter also receives contributions from persons in free society. Victoria Law has called *The Fire Inside* “an exception to the limited distribution of prisoner-made media...boast[ing] a circulation of over 2,000 and...an

---

<sup>70</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 122.

online archive accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.”<sup>71</sup> Diana Block, Urszula Wislanka, Cassie Pierson, and Pam Fadem of *The Fire Inside* Collective emphasize that the newsletter “allows a conversation to occur among people who otherwise would have great difficulty connecting with one another within and between different prisons, as well as across the walls.”<sup>72</sup> By inspiring dialogic community between prisoners and between prisoners and non-prisoners, *The Fire Inside* upsets institutional attempts to silence women prisoners—especially those who testify of prisoner abuse. The newsletter positions survivors of prisoner abuse as textual authorities, who, like Beloved in Morrison’s novel, demonstrate critical thinking about the systematic nature of their victimization.

Consider, for instance, the following abuse testimony, titled “Abu Ghraib Torture Began at Home.” It was submitted to *The Fire Inside* by M.S., a woman imprisoned at Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF):

It was not a surprise to me that the scandal in Iraq’s prison involved people who were guards in a U.S. prison. Most of the Abu Ghraib abuses happen in every prison in California: harassment, degradation, the inhumanity in treating prisoners. The worst is the plain arbitrariness of the guards. The staff here is not helpful in almost any situation.

We see abuses of helpless people every day. If you try to stand up for yourself, you go to jail (segregation unit, or SHU). The only thing they don’t do here is put naked prisoners in pyramids or put hoods on us. Otherwise, what I saw in Iraq is what happens here every day.

They say that this kind of treatment is against the rules. They have rules they are supposed to follow here, too. But they don’t. The Geneva Convention should apply as a human standard in all situations.

The belittling is constant and at all levels. Recently, I was standing in line for

---

<sup>71</sup> Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009): 140.

<sup>72</sup> Diana Block, Urszula Wislanka, Cassie Pierson, and Pam Fadem, “*The Fire Inside*: Newsletter of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners,” *NWSA Journal* 20.2 (Summer 2008): 48, 49.

sanitary pads; the white women in front of me got 10 pads each. I got three. When I asked if race had something to do with getting an inadequate number of pads, the guard made a scene and said I disrespected her. We can get strip searched at any time for no reason at all, and many of us do. They feel this is normal, anything they do to us is ‘normal.’

I had not heard that there were women held at Abu Ghraib, but I can just imagine the treatment they suffered. The incidents underscore the importance of people who stand up when something is not right. It was the soldier who blew the whistle who is the real hero. I had a situation when a staff member abused me. It was only because another staff member stood up for me that I can say I no longer suffer his abuse. I need to speak out about it, because the staff member who was harassing me was also harassing others. If I don’t speak the truth about it, then I am allowing the things that got me here to continue to chain me.<sup>73</sup>

Like Beloved’s attention to how she and other enslaved women on the slave ship were routinely forced to imbibe the urine of white crewmembers and endure the attacks of ship rats, M.S. enumerates the wealth of human rights violations that she and other women suffer at CCWF in addition to guard-on-prisoner sexual abuse. First, she implies that “harassment, degradation, the inhumanity in [guards’] treat[ment] [of] prisoners” is the norm in *domestic* U.S. prisons. Her word choices garner additional force because she subsequently remarks that any act of self-assertion by a woman prisoner is deemed a threat to the institution—that “standing up for yourself” as a CCWF woman prisoner is grounds for indefinite solitary confinement in the “segregation unit, or “SHU.” Further, M.S. remarks that CCWF women “can get strip searched at any time for no reason at all, and many of us do,” but does so only after linking arbitrary (and by implication, non-standard) strip searches in CCWF to the kinds that imprisoned persons have endured at the notorious U.S. war prison in Iraq: “The only thing they don’t do here is put naked prisoners in pyramids or put hoods on us. Otherwise, what I saw in Iraq is what happens

---

<sup>73</sup> M.S., “Abu Ghraib Torture Began at Home,” *The Fire Inside* 28 (Summer 2004)  
<<http://www.womenprisoners.org/fire/000511.html>>.

here every day.” By the time M.S. testifies of her encounter with sexual abuse, she, like Beloved, has made clear how it functions within a larger system in which those empowered to oversee imprisoned women frequently use their authority for purposes not outlined in their job descriptions. Thus, even before she mentions the “situation when a staff member abused [her],” M.S. has, like Beloved, established herself as a critically-thinking commentator on institutionalized abuse.

While M.S.’s narrative vividly displays the third element of prisoner abuse testimony, it also exemplifies the first element: an abuse survivor’s assertion of bodily reclamation. As with Beloved’s testimony, readers do not gather that M.S.’s “situation when a staff member abused [her]” is definitively sexual abuse by her use of the word “rape” or “sexual abuse,” but rather by through her use of allusion, as well as her responses to the abuse. A few sentences prior to the above phrase, M.S. remarks, “I had not heard that there were women held at Abu Ghraib, but I can just imagine the treatment they suffered.” The subtext here is that if women numbered among those held in an overseas carceral space where U.S. military prison guards were torturing prisoners of war, sexual abuse was sure to have been part of their bodily debasement.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, that M.S. must “speak out” about this “situation when a staff member abused [her]” in prison in order to free herself of “the things that got [her] [t]here” in the first place signals that she was indeed abused *sexually* by a male staff member.

Especially worth noting here is M.S.’s insistence that she “needs to speak out about” the

---

<sup>74</sup> See Duncan Gardham, “Abu Ghraib photos ‘show rape’,” *The Telegraph*, 9 May 2009, 26 April 2011 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/5395830/Abu-Ghraib-abuse-photos-show-rape.html>>.

sexual abuse. M.S. spends very little time detailing the victimizing nature of the abuse, but focuses instead on what's at stake in her publicizing it: "the staff member who was harassing me was also harassing others." M.S.'s seemingly personal aside ("I need to speak out about it") is, in other words, a shining example of verbal irony, for by her very submission of this piece of writing to *The Fire Inside*, she is "speak[ing] out" about her abuse. M.S. has used the written word to inform persons on both sides of the razor wire about her victimization *and* resistance. She has not dismissed the reality of her abuse behind bars, but has chosen to emphasize another one: the reality of her bodily reclamation, the fact of her seeking the help of "another staff member who stood up for [her]."

### **2.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown us that Morrison's *Beloved* is indeed haunted by contemporary accounts of prisoner abuse. Yet *Beloved* is also instructive for contemporary critical explorations of women prisoners' victimization behind bars. Ours is a moment in which sexual abuse in women's prisons is widespread, underrepresented, and rarely documented in a way that positions abused women prisoners as the textual authorities they show themselves to be in prisoner zines and newsletters. While the representation of prisoner abuse is a complex discursive site, and the important work of Beth Richie, Patricia Gagné, Cassandra Shaylor, Victoria Law, and Jodie Lawston and Ashley Lucas represent exceptions to the trend in prisoners' rights publishing to omit or paraphrase abuse survivors' interpretations of guard misconduct, Megan Sweeney is right to remind us that abused women prisoners generally appear in critical discourse as "silent

objects of cultural and political discourse.”<sup>75</sup> My reading of *Beloved* suggests that literary works—and fictional narratives of slavery, in particular—offer us important ways of reimagining these conventional stories about abused women prisoners. Neoslavery novels like *Beloved* show us how slave ships—and the U.S. women’s prisons in their abusive lineage—have been sites of terror and transformation at one and the same time. My reading also reminds readers that the investment that authors and scholars of African American literature have demonstrated in reconceptualizing routinized sexual violence—and those subjected to it—has a long and important history.

Black feminist scholars have shown us that during slavery, the rape of enslaved women was either pityingly referenced in the pamphlets of white abolitionists (recall Reverend John Newton’s, “When the [African] women and girls are taken on board a ship, naked, trembling, terrified, perhaps almost exhausted with cold, fatigue, and hunger, they are often exposed to the wanton rudeness of white savages.”) or projected as an attack on black masculinity—as in the slave narratives of Moses Roper, William Craft, and Josiah Henson. The result of this narrow representational landscape was, as Frances Smith Foster has remarked, “a monolithic characterization of slave women as utter

---

<sup>75</sup> Meg Sweeney, *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women’s Prisons* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010): 6. A useful example of how abused women prisoners are represented as victims in conventional prisoner abuse narratives is available below:

While incarcerated in a for-profit prison in Arizona, Christina Foos says she was attacked by a guard, Ernesto Rivas, as she stepped out of the shower in March 1997. Christina told *Prison Legal News* that she was startled by the sight of him, standing there with his exposed erection in hand. Before she could think of what to do, she says, Rivas ordered her to bend over the bed in her cell and he raped her. She says he returned two hours later to repeat the act.

Daniel Burton-Rose, “Our Sisters’ Keepers,” *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America’s Poor*, eds. Tara Herivel and Paul Wright (New York: Routledge, 2003): 258.

victims.”<sup>76</sup> And while nineteenth-century enslaved women’s narratives like Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* were instrumental in unsettling this “monolithic characterization,” the postmodern slave narratives of the late-twentieth century—novels like Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, J. California Cooper’s *Family*, and Morrison’s *Beloved*—have radically reimagined slave women’s common depiction as “utter victims.” As Deborah McDowell reminds us, these imaginative retellings of slave women’s lives “shift the points of [narrative] stress from sexual victimization to creative resistance.”<sup>77</sup> They also exemplify what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson might term “interventionist activity”—black women’s very intentional disruptions and revisions of their life narratives as they are depicted and understood by mainstream culture.<sup>78</sup> *Kindred*, *Dessa Rose*, *Family*, and *Beloved* have thus cast a light on enslaved women’s largely unrecorded stories of bodily debasement *and* bodily reclamation, abusive isolation *and* clandestine community. The authors of these novels demonstrate how African American fiction can help us imagine what Avery Gordon might call abuse survivors’ “right to complex personhood”—their right to be seen neither “as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents.”<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Frances Smith Foster, “‘In Respect to Females...’: Differences in Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators,” *Black Literature Forum* 15.2 (Summer 1981): 67.

<sup>77</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, “Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom—*Dessa Rose*,” *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, eds. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 146.

<sup>78</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 16-37.

<sup>79</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 4.

With this important *literary* history in mind, I maintain that *Beloved*'s capacity to inspire uncharted interdisciplinary thinking on prisoner abuse must not be underestimated. *Beloved* is, in the end, Morrison's century-spanning witness of women who both suffer and survive routinized sexual violence. Morrison's novel is as instructive to human rights reporters and critical prison studies scholars as it is to literary critics and slavery historians. Through *Beloved*, Morrison challenges us to imagine women abuse survivors the way so many of them see themselves: not as victims only, but also as friends, lovers, mothers, and resisters who discover new ways of living in spite of—or rather, precisely because of—their abusive captivity.

### 3. From Slave Ship to Supermax: Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, Suspensions of “Civilized Law,” and Evidentiary Abuse Testimony

Cringle smiled... ‘*Being on a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned to boot.*’ [...]. At the captain’s door, which had three bullet holes in it, Cringle tried the latch...I heard the squeaking of mattress springs, then a stifled whimper, and at last a venereal moan so odd in its commingling of pleasure and complaint that I had, of a sudden, the vision of being not aboard a ship but instead a bordello. It made no sense then, those Venusian groans, that gasping yip of orgasmic strings, but soon enough it would. ‘Has he a woman aboard?’ I looked to Cringle for an answer, but the mate wouldn’t look me in the eye; he chewed the inside of his cheek and politely pulled the door shut. ‘*Didn’t I say this was worse than prison?*’

—from Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*<sup>1</sup>

What, exactly, does a prison have in common with a slave ship? This question inevitably comes to my mind every time I encounter the passage that appears in the above epigraph from Charles Johnson’s National Book Award-winning novel, *Middle Passage*. While my query sounds, on the surface, agonizingly elementary, revisiting it in what I described in Chapter 2 as “a prison industrial complex context” has helped me see the haunting complexity that its simplicity disguises. On the one hand, it goes without saying that prisons and slave ships are both sites of isolated captivity, withdrawn locations where masses of men, women, and youths are held in extended confinement. Yet the parallel drawn by Johnson’s character Peter Cringle challenges us to wrestle not with the fact but rather nature of that extended confinement—to consider what kinds of practices and technologies are implemented in these environments to ensure that certain bodies will remain contained and constrained over long periods of time. In other words, when Cringle tells the novel’s protagonist, Rutherford Calhoun, that life on this ship Calhoun

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 25, 26, emphasis mine.

soon discovers to be a “*slaver*” is at least comparable to “being in jail,” Cringle’s association has everything to do with his knowledge of how harm and degradation are methodically manufactured and enforced within these sites in order to establish a system of large-scale social control.<sup>2</sup>

This deeper correlation that Cringle intends between the slave ship and the prison becomes more apparent when he has Calhoun listen in on what is clearly a sexual encounter in the Captain’s cabin. Calhoun hears “the squeaking of mattress springs, then a stifled whimper, and at last a venereal moan...odd in its commingling of pleasure and complaint.” Moments later, Calhoun witnesses a young cabin boy “scrambling out... his face drained of color [and]...his eyes low.” Just before the boy, Tommy O’Toole, emerges from the Captain’s private quarters, “shivering...and standing bowlegged as if his bum was cemented shut by dried semen,” Cringle returns to the image of the prison to help Calhoun comprehend the boy’s shamed demeanor, pained posture, and disturbing silence: “Didn’t I say this was worse than prison?”<sup>3</sup> Cringle then swears Calhoun to secrecy, thereby framing the incident for Calhoun, who is the newest addition to the crew, as aberrant, as perhaps the extreme of what one might see or experience on the ship. Yet I argue that a question Cringle poses to the boy in this same moment—“Are you and the captain finished, Tom?”—exposes the failure of his attempted cover-up.<sup>3</sup> Cringle’s query, in fact, implies that what seems aberrant is actually quite ordinary—that the boy’s forced sex with the Captain is anything but exceptional. It is emblematic of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

everyday terrors that readers later discover the captain and crewmembers mete out against persons they deem irrational, inferior, and therefore exploitable—persons who include cabin boys, and enslaved African men and women. Unspoken harm and unspeakable degradation are, in other words, the norm on *Middle Passage*'s slave ship—and, they are the norm in the contemporary prisons whose everyday horror stories haunt Cringle's allusion to the penal institution in the pages of this contemporary African American novel.

In this chapter, I offer a reading of *Middle Passage* that examines how Johnson's depictions of slave ship social relations are haunted by contemporary prisoners' writings on routinized abuse in U.S. maximum and supermaximum security prisons. Specifically, I argue that the abuse testimonies of male slave ship captives in Johnson's 1990 novel are shadowed by those of imprisoned writers who allude to slave ships in order to situate their routine mistreatment in high-security "corrections" sites in a broader historical context of large-scale immobilization and degradation. Drawing from Avery Gordon's conception of haunting, Colin Dayan's legal scholarship, and Dylan Rodríguez's theory of contemporary imprisonment as a "technology of violence" that traces its roots to the *Middle Passage*, I show how the unchecked incapacitation of Johnson's fictional captives in a "worse than prison" locale where "civilized law" no longer "holds water" spectrally alludes to a condition of repressive social control and dehumanization that has come to typify the high-security prison.

### 3.1 Suspensions of “Civilized Law”: The Contemporary High-Security Prison & the Reinstatement of the Slave Ship Social Order

#### I

One needn't download a book review to know that Johnson's *Middle Passage* is a novel about a slave captain and his crew, enslaved and formerly-enslaved people—in short, the Middle Passage and slavery. The work's title says it all. Yet as I observed in the opening pages of this chapter, *Middle Passage* is also, because of the very explicit allusive associations its characters make between prisons and slave ships, a novel whose slave past is profoundly haunted by a particularly brutal system of confinement that has resurfaced in our hyperpunitive carceral present. Today's maximum and supermaximum prisons are described by prison anthropologist Lorna Rhodes as locales of “extreme confinement,” specialized architectures of captivity typified by the indefinite solitary confinement and routine degradation of people prison administrations deem either innately irrational or naturally delinquent.<sup>4</sup> Legal scholars Leena Kurki and Norval Morris have observed that supermax prisons, in particular, are distinguished by “nearly complete isolation and deprivation of sensory stimuli.” These sites warehouse massive populations of prisoners to an unlimited number of *years* in windowless, six-by-eight-foot Security Housing Units for 23 ½ hours a day where they are fed through slots and prohibited human contact of any kind—including visits, phone calls, mail

---

<sup>4</sup> Lorna A. Rhodes, *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 4-5.

correspondence, and reading material.<sup>5</sup> To add further insult to the profound psychic injury psychiatrists and human rights organizations have shown these “prisons within prisons” to manufacture, reports of guards’ sadistic and unchecked physical violence against those held in these high-security prisons are so common they are unremarkable. Supermax prisoner Michael James, speaks quite compellingly to this point: “They beat the shit out of you...they slam your head against the wall and drop you while you are cuffed...There’s a lot who shouldn’t work here because they get a kick out of controlling people.”<sup>6</sup> James is not alone in testifying to the proliferation of a particularly malicious brand of prisoner abuse in the supermax prison. Vaughn Dortch, an African American man imprisoned at Pelican Bay State Prison—a California supermax complex where reports of abuse are so common that prisoners refer to the site as “Skeleton Bay”—told *60 Minutes* that the most egregious example of his sufferings there in the early 1990s involved six guards who ripped his clothes off, yanked him out of his cell, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Leena Kurki and Norval Morris, “The Purposes, Practices and Problems of Supermax Prisons,” *Crime and Justice* 28 (2001): 385. A classic example of how these prisons operate can be understood by way of a recent example. As of June 30, 2009, 54 of the 247 men imprisoned at Tamms Correctional Center’s Closed Maximum (C-Max) Security Unit—the majority of whom were suffering from serious mental health illnesses—had been held in solitary confinement *continuously, for more than ten years*. From its opening to the date of the investigation, solitary at Tamms entailed a minimum of 23 hours of windowless isolation to one’s cell, meals served through a feeding slot, controlled water intake, limited access to health professionals, limited reading material, limited, non-contact visits with family and friends, limited opportunities for exercise in a concrete, walled-in yard, and a whole host of non-negotiable restrictions: no telephone calls (except to one’s attorney), no jobs, no group or educational programs, no religious services, no recreational equipment. Additionally, imprisoned men deemed disciplinary problems by corrections officers were placed in strip cells where any possessions they had—including their clothes—were taken away from them indefinitely. George Pawlacyzk and Beth Hundsorfer, “Amnesty International Calls for Quinn to Enact Reforms at Tamms,” *Bellville-News Democrat: BND.com*, 3 September 2009, 18 December 2009 <<http://www.bnd.com/600/story/907644.html>>. See also the following related report: George Pawlacyzk and Beth Hundsorfer, “Trapped in Tamms: In Illinois’ only supermax facility, inmates are in cells 23 hours a day,” *Bellville-News Democrat: BND.com*, 4 August 2009, 18 December 2009 <<http://www.bnd.com/600/story/865377.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Lance Tapley, “Torture in Maine’s Prison,” *The Portland Phoenix*, 11-17 November 2005, 12 March 2012 <[http://www.portlandphoenix.com/features/top/ts\\_multi/documents/05081722.asp](http://www.portlandphoenix.com/features/top/ts_multi/documents/05081722.asp)>; Terry Kupers, “Mental Health in Men’s Prisons,” *Prison Masculinities*, eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 192-197.

submerged him in the boiling water of a tub for several minutes. Calling this a “Klan bath” in which they would transform Dortch into a “white boy,” the guards “scrubbed him with a bristle brush until his skin started to peel away.”<sup>7</sup>

I contend that the technologizing of large-scale immobilization and degradation in these high-security prisons finds haunting resonance with the slave ship social order that a character from Johnson’s novel describes as many have described supermax prisons: “worse than prison.” On the one hand, in *Middle Passage*, which was published during the rapid proliferation of supermax prisons in the 1980s and 90s, Johnson assuredly has a nineteenth-century slave ship at the forefront of his mind as, drawing from historical archives, he depicts African people who are forcibly removed from their homeland, “sardined belly-to-buttocks in [a ship’s] orlop,” and repeatedly beaten and raped by a white captain and crewmen.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as Avery Gordon articulates so well in *Ghostly Matters*, even in the nominal freedom of the contemporary moment, the Middle Passage and slavery are still very much with us—and our literary imaginations.<sup>9</sup> The Western system of mass enslavement haunts not only the literature we read but also everyday practices in that contemporary institution that lingers, ever so ominously, in the backdrop

---

<sup>7</sup> Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* (New York: Perennial, 1995): 82-84; Robert Perkinson, “Shackled Justice: Florence Federal Penitentiary and the New Politics of Punishment,” *Social Justice* 21.3 (Fall 1994): 121.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 65. As of 2005, 44 states had supermax prisons, housing over 25,000 prisoners. This represents an exponential (and unsettling) expansion: the first U.S. supermax prison opened in Marion, Illinois in 1983. Daniel P. Mears, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Supermax Prisons* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

of that literature: the prison. Yes, the Thirteenth Amendment formally ended slavery, but at the same time, its infamous exception clause authorized some of slavery's most heinous resurgences in the penal institution—an institution that, into the twenty-first century, technologizes forms of mass-based immobilization and degradation: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime*, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” As legal scholar Colin Dayan argues, “The Thirteenth Amendment marked the discursive link between the civilly dead and the slave or social nonperson...*the burdens and disabilities that constituted the badges of slavery took powerful hold on the language of penal compulsion.*”<sup>10</sup>

To clarify: I am not equating the identity of a contemporary prisoner with the antebellum slave's, for the enslaved person entered a condition of perpetual captivity, corporeal torment, economic exploitation, and social death not because of criminal acts, but solely because of his/her use-value in an emerging, global capitalistic enterprise. My association between the transatlantic bondsperson and the supermax captive of our time, then, has everything to do with the unsettling shared nature of their confinement—how slavery's most heinous “burdens and disabilities” have come to be sanctioned and even sponsored by the state as rational methods for controlling persons deemed intrinsically irrational—or, in a word, subhuman. So it is the same repressive logic upon which modernity was established—what Dayan discusses under the rubric of the slave's

---

<sup>10</sup> Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011): 64, 65, emphasis mine.

“be[ing] made superfluous”—that now legally authorizes the “extreme confinement” and routine brutal treatment of the contemporary supermax prisoner.<sup>11</sup>

With such a repression-driven carceral present in its narrative backdrop, I argue that Johnson’s description of the slave ship in *Middle Passage* as a place where “there’s not a *civilized* law that holds water” begins to take on new and unsettlingly contemporary meaning.<sup>12</sup> On Johnson’s fictional slave ship and in the U.S. supermax, the law does, mind you, “hold water.” More to the point, there is nothing illegal about the abominable actions taken by the white captain of a ship oddly named the *Republic*, a skipper who boasts of barbecuing and feasting on a Negro cabin boy, who beats slaves to a bloody pulp, who keeps enslaved men “double-ironed” and who takes pride in his ability to tight-pack these Africans captives he has branded, in some cases, on more than one occasion.<sup>13</sup>

[Captain] Ebenezer Falcon was, as they say, a ‘tight packer,’ having learned ten years ago from a one-handed French slaver named Captain Ledoux that if you arranged the Africans in two parallel rows, their backs against the lining of the ship’s belly, this left a free space at their rusty feet, and that, given the flexibility of bone and skin, could be squeezed with even more slaves if you made them squat at ninety-degree angles to one another. Flesh could conform to anything.<sup>14</sup>

It goes without saying that Captain Falcon is vicious, vile, and violent. Some might even go as far as classifying his actions—as well as those of his crewmen who rape, castrate, force-freed, and sic dogs on the enslaved—as uncivilized. But, as Falcon so gleefully brags, “there’s not a civilized law that holds water...once you’ve put to sea.” In the eyes of European maritime law, no harm has been done because African captives

---

<sup>11</sup> Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011): 72-73.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 32, emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

are read as bodies and not persons, unthinking commodities who have never been and never can be rational people or even legal subjects. Even Calhoun eventually arrives at this conclusion: “They were...chattel, according to white men’s laws.”<sup>15</sup> Neither Falcon nor his crew, then, have broken a law, violated a statute, or upset a judiciary by virtue of their abominable activity. The slave ship, that is to say, is precisely where brutality’s undisguised, everyday practice cannot be criminalized—a transatlantic state of exception where even unwritten “civilized law” is suspended.<sup>16</sup> The legal construction of enslaved persons as nonpersons began on the slave ship, and as Dayan, Orlando Patterson, and others have observed, slaves’ construction as property meant “social death”—not only the severing their kinship ties and alienation from communal life, but also their jettisoning from the realm of legal subjectivity, and therefore, legal protection. I argue that this condition of social extinction and legal *un*protection has been reinstated in the contemporary supermax prison where, as Dayan points out, “criminals are legally degraded [and] placed under disabilities very like those suffered by slaves,” and acts of violence and humiliation practiced against the supermax captive proceed with guards’ near-total impunity.<sup>17</sup> It is thus the supermax prisoner’s everyday horror stories—stories

---

<sup>15</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 132.

<sup>16</sup> In Agamben’s model, concentration camps are confinement spaces that are fundamentally constructed by a governing of human life and death that surpasses juridical notions of crime. These netherworldly zones of controlled human debilitation are “born not out of ordinary law...but out of a state of exception.” Further, actions like those of Falcon’s and his crew that I’ve highlighted—routinely raping women, beating enslaved men and women to the point of profuse bleeding, castrating enslaved men—would be impossible to comprehend as *legal* crimes, following Agamben’s logic. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998): 166-167.

<sup>17</sup> Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011): 98.

like Michel James's, Vaughn Dortch's, as well as those told provocatively by imprisoned writers who I will discuss later in this chapter—that haunt the abuse testimonies of Johnson's routinely-wounded African slaves in *Middle Passage*.

As a way of providing context for what specifically makes the testimonies shared by Johnson's slaves *abuse* narratives, I will now draw our attention to the work of activist-scholar Dylan Rodríguez. In the section that follows, I offer a reading of *Middle Passage* that is informed by Rodríguez's conception of transatlantic captivity as a "technology of violence."<sup>18</sup> Rodríguez provides a helpful theoretical framework for what I argue are interrelated sites of large-scale immobilization and degradation—the slave ship and the high-security prison. Rodríguez will help us understand how the slave ship, a confinement space that maritime historian Marcus Rediker discusses as "a seagoing prison," actually established "a blueprint for the carceral technologies of the landlocked U.S. prison."<sup>19</sup>

## II

In his work, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, Dylan Rodríguez remaps the terrain of brutal captivity in the West, insisting that dark episodes from the slave ship, slave plantation, and contemporary prison should be interrogated *as practices*—not as tragic or exceptional incidents on the "un-American" stage of American history. Rodríguez, that is to say, is interested in the

---

<sup>18</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 223.

<sup>19</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007): 45; Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 234.

precedents, legal and otherwise, that give rise to the emergence of a late twentieth-century prison that actually “*functions* through excess and violations, at times uncodified or nominally ‘illegal,’ though generally occurring within generously interpreted rubrics of institutional policy and protocol.”<sup>20</sup> It is this critical understanding that frames the final chapter of Rodríguez’s *Forced Passages*, in which he theorizes the slave ship as a “technology of violence,” a systematically-constructed confinement regime whose innovations in large-scale bodily immobilization and degradation represent a “genealogical lineage” for a contemporary prison system that is “centrally focused on containing, controlling, and punishing the bodies of white civil society’s unassmilables and incorrigibles.”<sup>21</sup> Because Rodríguez’s thinking about the slave ship and contemporary prison’s interconnectedness is so central to my reading of Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, I offer here a generous but especially relevant excerpt from his chapter:

There is a material kinship between the prison as a contemporary regime of violence and the structures of a racialized mass incarceration and disintegration prototyped in the chattel transfer of enslaved Africans... The Middle Passage was, at its spatial core, a site of profound subjective and communal disruption for captive Africans: manifesting an epochal rupture from familiar networks of kinship, livelihood, and social reproduction, the voyage was the threshold of geographic, subjective, and bodily displacement for the transatlantic imprisoned... The prison has come to form a hauntingly similar spatial and temporal continuum between social and biological notions of life and death, banal liberal civic freedom and totalizing unfreedom, community and alienation, agency and liquidation, the ‘human’ and the subhuman/nonhuman: [it is] a reconstruction of the Middle Passage’s constitutive logic... The contemporary prison, working within the genealogical lineage of the Middle Passage, constantly prototypes technologies premised on a respatialization of bodies and coercive reembodiment of spaces.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 46, emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 239, 223.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 224, 231, 239.

Throughout the chapter, Rodríguez, drawing from a wide range of transatlantic and penological historical archives, does a superb job of linking the slave ship's "technology of violence" with that of the contemporary high-security prison. He begins with an articulation of how slaves' strictly-enforced confinement and subjection to degradation on the slave ship reinforced their utility to enslavers who sought nonhuman/subhuman entities against which their Western "humanity" could be measured. Moreover, for Rodríguez, the slave ship as social order operated through the methodical use of a specialized carceral architecture (i.e., tight-packing in a ship's hull), and the routinization of slaves' degradation (i.e., the repeated force-feeding, branding, and forced "dancing" of enslaved men and women, the repeated rape of enslaved women). Such bodily immobilization and humiliation shaped the nature of confinement on the slave ship in a fundamental way: enslaved Africans would not only be held in place, but would simultaneously be taught their place. "The Middle Passage," Rodríguez states, "was simultaneously a *pedagogical and punitive* practice that deployed strategies of unprecedented violence in order to 'teach' and coerce captive Africans in the methods of an incipient global ordering."<sup>23</sup>

In a similar vein, the individual Security Housing Units (SHU) within the contemporary high-security prison bespeak what Rodríguez terms "the respatialization of bodies and coercive reembodiment of spaces." Here, those prisoners who administrators and guards classify as mental cases or born criminals become today's yardsticks for "the

---

<sup>23</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 233.

‘human’ and the subhuman/nonhuman.” They, too, are crammed for hours on end into highly-specialized carceral architectures (windowless, electronically-monitored, six-by-eight-foot steel and concrete holding spaces), and find themselves routinely and sadistically degraded (in the 1990s, guards at one of California’s high-security prisons shot and killed imprisoned men for sport). Thus, for Rodríguez, the slave ship and high-security prison’s “material kinship” lies in their operation—in how those in authority structure confinement in these sites in a way that brings about a “massive human departure.”<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely this “massive human departure” that I argue Johnson’s 1990 novel captures so well, given its hauntingly explicit linkage of life on a slave ship with “being in jail” and eventually—with experiences that are “worse than prison.” Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, though it certainly foregrounds the seafaring experiences of ex-slave Rutherford Calhoun from a New Orleans port to Senegambia and back, revolves around a terrifyingly typical middle passage that Calhoun is compelled to record in a ship log. Put differently, while Vincent O’Keefe is right to remind us that “*Middle Passage* restricts itself primarily to Rutherford’s story,” while Elizabeth Muther aptly notes that Calhoun observes the routine suffering of the enslaved, but “still tries to make the log his own,” Calhoun’s log, which comprises the whole of the novel, often takes on a life of its own, veering from the turmoil of his personal life to his empathetic interactions with the ship’s captives, a proud African people called the Allmuseri.<sup>25</sup> Again, my reading of the novel

---

<sup>24</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 227.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent O’Keefe, “Reading Rigor Mortis: Offstage Violence and Excluded Middles ‘in’ Johnson’s *Middle Passage* and Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *African American Review* 30.4 (1996): 640; Elizabeth Muther, “Isadora at Sea: Misogyny as Comic Capital in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*,” *African American Review* 30.4 (1996): 654.

does not overlook how self-absorbed Calhoun is regarding the damage that witnessing the middle passage wreaks on him—how attentive he is to the way in which the transatlantic journey turns his hair “sugah white,” alters his language and vocal intonations, and leaves him realizing just how much his “body’s range of motion [is] restricted.”<sup>26</sup> But, I also contend that, like Rodríguez, Calhoun is incredibly attentive to the way in which captive Africans are systematically deformed—to how the captain and crewmen’s methodical containment and relentless degradation of the Allmuseri on the *Republic*’s constitute a “technology of violence” that is also a “massive human departure.” At one point in the voyage, Calhoun’s perception of the dehumanizing nature of the Allmuseri’s confinement on the ship is especially sharp: “The Africans, I realized, were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. We had changed them....the slaves’ life among the lowest strata of Yankee society—and the horrors they experienced—were subtly reshaping their souls as thoroughly as Falcon’s tight-packing had contorted their flesh...[they were] no longer Africans, yet not Americans either.”<sup>27</sup> Calhoun’s ability throughout the novel to read the Allmuseri’s treatment not as tragic or exceptional, but as systematic—“*We* had changed them”—is precisely what I argue makes Johnson’s novel as much about the slave past as a prison present characterized by the methodical and large-scale immobilization and humiliation of supermax prisoners.

I am struck, in other words, by how deeply Johnson’s protagonist thinks about the habitual torment of the Allmuseri. In time, Calhoun assents to Captain Falcon’s

---

<sup>26</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 172, 208.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

statement early in the novel that “no civilized law . . . holds water” on his slave ship.<sup>28</sup> After eavesdropping on a crewmember who trains ferocious dogs to attack the most recalcitrant of the captive Africans, Calhoun remarks: “This was not a ship; it was a coffin . . . the *Republic* . . . on the water [was] leagues away from culture or civilization.”<sup>29</sup> I will argue that within the pages of Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, Calhoun provides us with an analysis of slave ship life that conveys it is indeed “worse than prison,” indeed a haunting refraction of everyday life in supermax prisons that Rodríguez and others provocatively theorize as reinvented slave ships. In the next section, I will draw from Rodríguez’s slave ship/contemporary prison carceral model to show how Johnson’s protagonist uses his log to register abusive treatment that, once labeled as continuous with a place “worse than prison,” spectrally alludes to the system of repressive social control in today’s high-security prison even as it depicts the transatlantic past.

### III

Like Rodríguez, Calhoun is intensely—perhaps unsettlingly—observant of two interrelated aspects of African captives’ confinement on the slave ship: (1) their methodical containment to a specialized carceral architecture and (2) the routinization of their degradation. Let us first consider Calhoun’s attention to the containment of the Allumseri on the *Republic*. Earlier in the chapter, I discussed how attentive Calhoun is to Captain Falcon’s calculated restraint of the Allmuseri—to the way in which Falcon

---

<sup>28</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 32.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 105, 106.

actually takes pride in the many methods he discovers for “stowing” slaves in the hull of his ship: “[Falcon] was, as they say, a ‘tight-packer,’ having learned ten years ago from a French slaver named Captain Ledoux that... flesh could conform to anything.”<sup>30</sup> I will now analyze the response of Calhoun and the Allmuseri to such bodily immobilization. The language of their responses, I contend, is haunted by the very phraseology commonly used to discuss the containment of contemporary supermax prisoners.

Calhoun’s initial reaction is one laden with the language of Christian humanism, one that is rather uncritically focused on the evil of one man rather than the construction and mechanization of an evil machine. Reflecting on a morning in which he notices that the Allmuseri are “unable to come up on their own” when the crew prepares to give them some air, Calhoun remarks: “So when they came half-dead from the depths, these eyeless contortionists emerging from a shadowy Platonic cave, they were stiff and sore and stank of their own vomit and feces. Right then I decided our captain was more than just evil. He was the Devil. Who else could twist the body so terribly?”<sup>31</sup> Calhoun’s statement here, though obviously one opposing the extreme nature of the enslaved’s everyday containment, is ultimately fixated on Falcon’s fiendishness. While I do not discount the reality of Falcon’s sadistic pleasure, I contend that initially, Calhoun, like many aspiring slave trade abolitionists and contemporary prisoner rights’ advocates, voices a Christian humanist indignation toward an *individual* rather than a system characterized by cruelty.

---

<sup>30</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 120.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

In fact, it takes a few pages before Calhoun more fully grasps how Falcon, the crew, and he were all complicit in maintaining a carceral architecture whose greatest evil was not the tight-packing orders of one man, but rather, the irreversible impact of a large-scale method of containment: “The Africans, I realized, were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. *We had changed them...*the slaves’ life among the lowest strata of Yankee society—and the horrors they experienced—*were subtly reshaping their souls as thoroughly as Falcon’s tight-packing had contorted their flesh...*[they were] no longer Africans, yet not Americans either.”<sup>32</sup> The Allmuseri’s corporeal constriction within a carceral architecture, Calhoun comes to realize, is difficult to view less because of the “evil” it reveals in Falcon and all those who comply with his “devilish” commands, but because of what it does and has done to physically and psychically deform the Allmuseri. Subjected to overcrowding, darkness, and contamination, the *Republic’s* captive Africans are “not wholly Allmuseri anymore...no longer Africans, yet not Americans either.” They have suffered too long to be the same, spent too many sleeping and waking hours in a hull where their daily lives, Calhoun reminds us, involve being perpetually manacled while “rest[ing] on the laps of others...in scummy darkness foul with defecation, slithering with water snakes.”<sup>33</sup> Calhoun’s second reaction to the tight-packing of captive Africans in the cargo hold thus reflects a deeper-level awareness of how confinement on the *Republic* functions. Confinement is indeed constraint, but it is also constraint that is carefully calculated, designed not only to detain but also debase. Calhoun’s way of

---

<sup>32</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 124-125, emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

articulating this interplay between large-scale bodily constraint and psychological violence is quite consistent with what Rodríguez has discussed under the rubric of “massive human departure.” Additionally, the Christian humanist/spiritual language within Calhoun’s responses (“[Falcon] was the Devil,” “We... were subtly reshaping their souls”) bring to mind the words of Reverend William McGarvey, a Presbyterian minister and contemporary prisoners’ rights activist who describes SHUs—those “worse than prison” spaces to which characters in Johnson’s novel disturbingly allude—in a similar manner:

What concerns us as people of faith is the destruction of the human spirit. *When human beings are subject to conditions that destroy who they are*, it is incumbent upon the whole faith community to call our culture and, yes, even our government to accountability. If we allow solitary confinement to continue in our society, especially when we have been informed of the harmful results, *what does that say about the kind of people we all have become?*<sup>34</sup>

Calhoun’s attention to the routinization of the Allmuseri’s degradation provides us with a second look into his understanding of the systemization of confinement on the slave ship—and, by extension, in the “worse than prison” SHU whose haunting allusive presence frames the novel. No scene better captures Calhoun’s perception of degradation’s centrality on the *Republic* than the one that follows a major uprising. The enslaved Africans have taken control of the ship in the aftermath of the crewmen’s failed mutiny. They recount at length their everyday terrors before Cringle, one of the few surviving crewmen, who they have tied to a chair:

Three of [the Allmuseri men] I recognized as warriors named Ghofan, Diamelo, and Akim...they had reason, good reason, for seeing the last of the *Republic*’s

---

<sup>34</sup> For more, please see: <http://www.whatthefolly.com/2011/08/30/transcript-rev-william-mcgarveys-testimony-on-the-harmful-impacts-of-solitary-confinement-practices-at-california%E2%80%99s-secure-housing-units-shu-prison-facilities/>

officers dead. Akim, a wide, dark-fired man who was short but had the strength of three, squatted on his hams; he made them relive his sister's death five days after we set sail. Ghofan, a black who had been gelded, and then suffered the torture of the brand, pulled his shirt down to show them how [Captain] Falcon had burned in the initials ZS not once but three times until the impression was as clear as stigmata, or the markings on cattle. *Each man had his own atrocity to tell. If not brutality to them then a beadroll of humiliations the midshipmen had inflicted upon the [Allmuseri] women, two of whom had been raped, or on their children, and to this list Diamelo added the small but nonetheless violent assaults on their spirit—parading them naked for bathing before their own children, forcing them to eat by ramming fingers down their throats, answering their wild clawing from the hold with gales of laughter...* On and on the charges came, and with each accusation a finger was stabbed toward the mate.<sup>35</sup>

I draw particular attention here to Calhoun's very intentional framing of the Allmuseri's sufferings as routine, widely experienced, and sadistically inflicted. While we only receive secondhand testimony of the captive Africans' torment, I emphasize that this is the first passage in the novel in which Calhoun's phraseology explicitly incorporates a lexicon implying that the everyday degradations endured by the captive Africans becomes acts of abuse: "the torture of the brand," "atrocity," "beadroll of humiliations," "raped," "violent assaults." Regardless of whether other crewmembers recognize the Allmuseri as living, breathing, human beings who deserve protection from blatantly malicious treatment (legal or otherwise), the terms that Calhoun uses in this passage reveal that he does believe they are warranted some measure of human dignity.

Moreover, Calhoun is exhaustive in delineating the ordinary and sadistic nature of these degradations. As he notes, "*Each man had his own atrocity to tell.*" Though Ghofan, Diamelo, and Akim begin this atrocity-telling, *every other Allmuseri man present* testifies of deliberate actions the *Republic's* captain and crew have taken to

---

<sup>35</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 133-134, emphasis mine.

wound *and* disgrace them, including the “gales of laughter” crewmen direct at manacled Africans who feebly attempt to pull themselves up from the ship’s hull. Calhoun later reveals how deeply the Allmuseri were dishonored by the enforcement of their nudity on the ship: he remarks that the captive Africans said the crewmen “had abused” them by stripping them naked before their children, and in the fundamental sense that they didn’t “lower [their] eyes when they passed on to show proper respect.”<sup>36</sup> Further, Calhoun struggles to keep track of the number and diversity of humiliating afflictions of which the Africans testify. He mentions castration (“Ghofan, a black who had been gelded”), repeated branding (“Falcon had burned [on Ghofan] the initials *ZS* not once but three times until the impression was as clear as stigmata”), sexual violence (“two [Allmuseri women]... had been raped), and force-feedings (“forcing them to eat by ramming fingers down their throats”) but leaves unspecified the details on the “beadroll of humiliations” that Allmuseri women suffer in addition to rape. In the end, then, Calhoun compellingly shows us that degradation is no aberration but a sadistic *practice* on the *Republic*. It is yet another method by which Captain Falcon and the crew harness physical and psychological injury in order to confine and discipline a captive African population. I add that Calhoun’s attention to the abiding presence of maliciousness in these routine scenes of humiliation is an attention also demonstrated by imprisoned and non-imprisoned persons who discuss abuse practices in California’s high-security prisons of the contemporary epoch. From within these “worse than prison” referents that haunt the pages of Johnson’s novel, an unsettling abundance of prisoner testimonies have revealed

---

<sup>36</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990):155.

how routinely inmate injury and death have resulted from guards' frequent boot-kicking, hog-tying, beating, and shooting of imprisoned men in the name of "sadistic diversion."<sup>37</sup>

In the next sections, I turn our attention to prisoner abuse testimonies from these "worse than prison" carceral locales that, as I have shown, ominously linger in *Middle Passage*'s narrative backdrop. I will make the case that the abuse testimonies of male slave ship captives in Johnson's novel are profoundly haunted by those of contemporary imprisoned writers who, like characters in Johnson's novel, draw parallels between the nature of confinement on slave ships and prisons in order to situate their routine mistreatment behind bars in a broader historical context.

### **3.2 The New Slave Ship & Evidentiary Abuse Testimony**

I've lived through the [middle] passage, died on the passage...there are too many things to remind me of the 23 ½ hours that I'm in this cell...To be alone constantly is to torture normal men.

—George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*<sup>38</sup>

Today, we are witnesses to a new high-tech slave trade. This new slave ship is known to many as "prison." The only difference in this slave ship is that it does not sail. Black men, Black women, and even Black children who are now tried as adults, are packed into this ship (cell) like sardines, and they are treated like animals, not humans...These inmates are being confined in an 8' x 10' stand-up grave (called a cell), and most of their waking hours are spent rotting away like wood in salt water.

—Melvin Farmer, *The New Slave Ship: A Ship That Does Not Sail*<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 1999): 170-174.

<sup>38</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 233, 234, 247.

<sup>39</sup> Melvin Farmer, *The New Slave Ship: A Ship That Does Not Sail* (Los Angeles: Milligan Books, 1998): 5, 16.

Today I recognized a Slave ship  
One still in existence and used today  
It was packed to the max with racks of Blacks  
The sight of it took my breath away  
Identically it was filled with 'livestock'  
And chains connecting everyone  
Cruel and tyrannical shipmates and overseers  
And men up high with guns

—Rashi'd Qawi' Al-Ami'n, "I Say Today I Recognized a Slave Ship"<sup>40</sup>

From Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano's eighteenth-century slave narratives to the more contemporary imaginative literature of Robert Hayden, Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Caryl Phillips, Fred D'Aguiar, and M. Nourbese Philip, the voices of slave ship captives have been central to the African American, Caribbean, and Black British literary traditions. In the context of the African American literary tradition in particular, the slave ship has served a central trope for black confinement experiences that have spanned four centuries and three continents. The formerly-imprisoned Black Arts Movement poet Etheridge Knight gives voice to this tropological significance in his introduction to *Black Voices from Prison*: "From the time of the first of our fathers were bound and shackled and herded into the dark hold of a 'Christian' slaveship—right on up to the present day, the whole experience of the Black man in American can be summed up in one word: prison."<sup>41</sup> It's clear that for Knight and others, the slave ship has a particular figurative utility. Alluding to the slave ship functions to situate a whole host of black confinement experiences in the Americas (i.e.,

---

<sup>40</sup> Rashi'd Qawi' Al-Ami'n, "I Say Today I Recognized a Slave Ship," *Cell Door Magazine* 5.1 March 2003, 12 March 2012 <<http://www.lairdcarlson.com/celldoor/00501/Al-Ami'n00501SlaveShip.htm>>.

<sup>41</sup> Knight qtd. in H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 245.

the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, segregation, and incarceration) in a racialized historical context.

The references to the slave ship in the above epigraphs, however, are reflective of a late twentieth-century literary practice that has emerged clandestinely, in the prison underground. In this critically-unexamined tradition, the slave ship is neither a reimagined historical experience nor a trope for the institutionalization of black confinement in the West. Allusions to the slave ship in this model constitute what Dylan Rodríguez describes as a “radical prison praxis.”<sup>42</sup> These slave ship allusions are part and parcel of an oppositional conceptualization of contemporary U.S. penal practice; they are shards of a theoretical code language that persons dispossessed of voice have fashioned in order to illuminate and eradicate large-scale prisoner abuse in the high-security prison.

For instance, in his prison letter collection, *Soledad Brother*, the famed imprisoned intellectual George Jackson declares “I’ve lived through the [middle] passage, died on the passage” in order to move beyond what Elaine Scarry calls “the unsharability” of pain’s infliction and actually articulate his injurious bouts with prisoner abuse and indefinite solitary confinement.<sup>43</sup> A mere decade before the supermaximum prison would establish itself as the new standard of bodily immobilization and routinized degradation, Jackson was confined to a maximum-security California prison that shared

---

<sup>42</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 104-112.

<sup>43</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 233; Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 4.

many of its dehumanizing innovations. Entombed in the maximum-security wing of Soledad prison through the 1960s and 70s—an annex of the prison which Jackson referred to as, “jail, within a jail”—Jackson was subjected to habitual beatings and racialized harassment, largely because of his political beliefs—as I discussed in Chapter 1.<sup>44</sup> Jackson alludes to the slave ship in his prison letters in order to convey the systematic—rather than aberrational—nature of his sufferings:

Everyone in here is locked up 24 hours a day. They have no past, no future, no goal other than the next meal. They’re afraid, confused and confounded by a world they know they did not make, that they feel they cannot change...Confinement in this small area all day causes a buildup of tension. The unavoidable consequence is stupidity, a return to childish behavior, overreaction...You know we aren’t even allowed to get angry. They took away my showering action on Monday (the half hour on the tier we were getting)...No problem, though. There is a sink in my cell...[This] old slave [is] trying to deal with his environment.<sup>45</sup>

Here, Jackson shows that his apparent “overreaction” to containment to a “small area all day” and ensuing punishment are reflective of how the slave ship captive did whatever s/he could to transform a condition of extended bodily immobilization—how the “old slave” whose condition Jackson can indeed understand sought ways of “deal[ing] with his environment.” Jackson’s slave ship allusion thus functions more as a theoretical language than mere metaphor; referencing the systematic nature of confinement on the slave ship helps Jackson to illuminate and express the methodical character of his confinement and brutal treatment in the maximum security prison.

---

<sup>44</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 154, 206.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 154, 213.

Since Jackson's assassination by San Quentin guards in 1971, imprisoned men like Melvin Farmer have carried on this tradition of alluding to the slave ship as a way of articulating critical understandings about hyperpunitive incarceration and prisoner abuse. Farmer's attention to how blacks, and of course, others are methodically "packed into this ship (cell) like sardines," and how regularly they are degraded—treated "like animals, *not humans*"—demonstrates his understanding of how the increasingly repressive high-security prison has dehumanization as its object, and how this objective traces its roots to the extreme bodily immobilization and degradation of an allegedly irrational African Other on the slave ship. Prisoners like Jackson, Farmer, and Rashi'd Qawi' Al-Ami'n—an imprisoned man whose poem "I Say Today I Recognized a Slave Ship" also offers a Middle Passage conceptual framework for his assessment of everyday life in the contemporary supermax (see the epigraph above)—participate in a distinct, literary practice that shows up, marginally, in Johnson's *Middle Passage*.

Situating this literary practice in the larger context of this dissertation, I contend that the imprisoned writer's appropriation of a slave ship lexicon to register the extreme immobilization and degradation of contemporary supermax prisoners represents a form of prisoner abuse testimony. Literary testimonies of the imprisoned, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, can be understood most fundamentally as in-group, dialogic affirmations of voice amid systematic silencing (recall that chapter's reference to the work of Geneva Smitherman). The contemporary prison texts I've been discussing in this chapter—texts I will hereafter refer to as *evidentiary abuse testimonies*—also draw from this base-level definition. Additionally though, evidentiary abuse testimonies, similar to evidentiary abuse affidavits, situate abuse survivors/witnesses (1) as knowledgeable and enumerative

abuse documenters and (2) redress aspirants who actively appeal for third-party intervention in regimes of routinized abuse.<sup>46</sup> Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, Farmer's autobiographical reflections, Al-Ami'n's lyrical expressions, and "Slave Ship," a poem written by contemporary prisoner Steve Fraley, are all evidentiary abuse testimonies. I will make the case that Fraley's poem, in particular, haunts the testimonial expressions of slave ship captives in Johnson's *Middle Passage*.

#### IV

Ramming sticks up brothers' asses  
Stomping on naked toes  
    with combat boots  
Dog sniffing genitals  
    he may decide to bite  
Shotgun toten-women  
    in case we want to fight

Naked in the courtyard  
    for seven hours  
    on a warm summer night  
Flexicuffs on our wrists  
    much, much too tight.

Men crying  
    men screaming  
men lying down  
some scheming  
    some pleading  
    shitting on the ground  
Cracking heads  
    playing dead  
    trying to survive  
we are victims

---

<sup>46</sup> For a sense of what evidentiary abuse affidavits are/do, please visit:  
<http://documenttheabuse.com/whatis.html>

of this war  
just staying alive.

Stripped of manhood  
Stripped of dignity  
only strength can stand  
There's no win  
For us brothers  
in this cracker's land.

Power to the people  
Who held their head  
high in degradation  
Only the strongest  
Will overcome  
in this type [of] situation.  
—Steve Fraley, “Slave Ship”<sup>47</sup>

Steve Fraley, now deceased, was a former New York state prisoner. *Cell Door Magazine* reveals that Fraley was especially widely-read in the prison literary underground, where his dedication to the written word before and after his release earned the respect of many.<sup>48</sup> It is my contention that Fraley's poem, “Slave Ship,” is an evidentiary prisoner abuse testimony that haunts Johnson's *Middle Passage*. What makes Fraley's “Slave Ship” an evidentiary abuse testimony (in accordance with the terms I outlined above) is that, first and foremost, it positions Fraley as a critically-thinking documenter of prisoner abuse from start to finish. Fraley's use of the first-person plural (“we”) throughout “Slave Ship,” for instance, bespeaks his understanding of the large-scale and methodical (rather than individualistic and arbitrary) character of prisoner

---

<sup>47</sup> Steve Fraley, “Slave Ship,” *Prison Masculinities*, eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 57-58.

<sup>48</sup> Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, eds. *Prison Masculinities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 270. See also <http://www.lairdcarlson.com/celldoor/01001/Whitman01001NDRANLoses.htm>.

abuse at this particular facility. Fraley also has no difficulty enumerating prisoner abuse throughout his poem's six short stanzas. Fraley is quite attentive to the practice of sodomy ("Ramming sticks up brothers' asses"), guards' enforcement of prisoners' nudity, and the sadism that surrounds guards' acts of violence ("Stomping on naked toes with combat boots/Dog sniffing genitals/he may decide to bite").

Fraley also demonstrates the second element of evidentiary abuse testimony: he represents himself as a redress aspirant, as someone actively appealing for third-party intervention in the treatment of the imprisoned in the high-security prison. At one level, Fraley's laundry list of prisoner abuse indictments reveals the criminality intrinsic to the criminal justice system. Yet Fraley is also attentive to the psychological impact of such abuse on the imprisoned men ("Men crying/men screaming/men lying down"), and is aware that these men will likely not receive any legal restitution for their wounds because they are not seen by the law as having many or any human rights: "There's no win/For us brothers/in this cracker's land." I emphasize, however, Fraley's closing stanza in which his Black Panther declaration—"Power to the people"—functions both as an affirmation of the inner strength of abuse survivors "Who h[o]ld their head/high in degradation," and also as a rallying cry for third-party intervention. Fraley's "Power to the people" is, I contend, an entreaty for coalitional collaboration, a closing proclamation whose very utterance is also a plea—as Black Panther George Jackson's "Power to the people!" was a proclamation and plea that ended the letters he sent to former Black Panther Angela Y. Davis, who, of course, eventually chaired his defense committee.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970): 286.

Fraley's "Slave Ship" is thus a shining example of what I have termed an evidentiary abuse testimony. In the next and final section of this chapter, I will show how Fraley's evidentiary abuse testimony haunts a testimony scene in Johnson's *Middle Passage*.

### 3.3 Conclusion: *Middle Passage* & Evidentiary Abuse Testimony

In an earlier section of this chapter, I highlighted a passage in Johnson's *Middle Passage* in which Calhoun reveals the degradation of the African captives on the slave ship *Republic* as a sadistic practice. I now wish to return this passage, because it, better than any other passage in the novel, exemplifies what I have called evidentiary abuse testimony. For the sake of convenience, I have recopied the passage below.

Three of [the Allmuseri men] I recognized as warriors named Ghofan, Diamelo, and Akim...they had reason, good reason, for seeing the last of the *Republic's* officers dead. Akim, a wide, dark-fired man who was short but had the strength of three, squatted on his hams; he made them relive his sister's death five days after we set sail. Ghofan, a black who had been gelded, and then suffered the torture of the brand, pulled his shirt down to show them how [Captain] Falcon had burned in the initials *ZS* not once but three times until the impression was as clear as stigmata, or the markings on cattle. Each man had his own atrocity to tell. If not brutality to them then a beadroll of humiliations the midshipmen had inflicted upon the [Allmuseri] women, two of whom had been raped, or on their children, and to this list Diamelo added the small but nonetheless violent assaults on their spirit—parading them naked for bathing before their own children, forcing them to eat by ramming fingers down their throats, answering their wild clawing from the hold with gales of laughter... *On and on the charges came, and with each accusation a finger was stabbed toward the mate.*<sup>50</sup>

It is crucial to understand this scene's centrality to the entirety of *Middle Passage*. At this point in the novel, the African captives have taken control of the ship, and are preparing to kill Peter Cringle, who, as one of the few surviving crewmembers, becomes the most convenient scapegoat for Allmuseri men who are seething with fury as they

---

<sup>50</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990): 133-134, emphasis mine.

recount the routine violence and degradation Captain Falcon and the rest of the crew have inflicted on them. These African men are, in fact, dramatizing their sufferings as they enumerate them, one by one, before a bound Cringle and an alarmed Calhoun. Akim “ma[kes] them relive his sister’s death,” Ghofan “pull[s] his shirt down to show them” the multiple brands Falcon had burned into his flesh, and other men jab accusatory fingers in Cringle’s face as they tell of their torment. In other words, the Allmuseri men are testifying, in both the legal and expressive senses of the word: they are providing concrete evidence of their habitual brutal treatment before a surrogate defendant (Cringle) and jury (Calhoun), and they are presenting this evidence in an intentionally staged manner. These men thus demonstrate the first element of what I have called evidentiary abuse testimony: they use their voices and bodies to “document” their routinized suffering in detail.

The Allmuseri men also demonstrate the second element of evidentiary abuse testimony. Throughout this scene, they show themselves to be redress aspirants, persons seeking to use their abuse testimonies to leverage attempts at achieving some measure of justice for their flagrant exploitation. Part of why, for instance, the men testify of their abuse so emotively is because they are seeking Calhoun’s vote of confidence: they intend to gain restitution for their many afflictions through beheading Cringle (who, of course, has become the representative for Falcon and all of the crew), and desire unanimous support of that plan. Though these African men ultimately do not receive an assent from Calhoun (and thus do not kill Cringle), their abuse testifying does fundamentally transform the way Calhoun conceptualizes who they are and the harm they have suffered. I am arguing that Calhoun, who a few pages earlier, asserts reluctantly

that the Allmuseri are “chattel, according to white men’s law,” suddenly sees them as legal persons and their routine sufferings on the slave ship as criminal offenses after hearing their testimonies.<sup>51</sup> Calhoun’s very legal word choices attest to this transformation. First, he constructs Cringle as the recipient of criminal indictments—“on and on the *charges* came.” Moreover, a few sentences later in this same passage, Calhoun’s language reflects a significant alteration in how he conceptualizes the African men’s legal subjectivity in theory, if not in practice. He describes the men’s testimonies of violent treatment and degradation as “evidence of American crimes perpetrated on the Allmuseri.”<sup>52</sup>

That Calhoun’s perception of the Allmuseri’s routine brutal treatment alters so drastically after they offer their abuse testimonies speaks to the significance of speech expressed by those who are systematically-silenced. Calhoun cannot comprehend the slave ship social order as a site of criminality until he attends to the testimonies of those dispossessed of voice. Moreover, Calhoun does not fully grasp the Allmuseri people *as people* until he hears them testify. This scene represents, in fact, the first time in the novel that Calhoun refers to multiple African men by their names: previously he called them “our cargo.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, like Fraley’s evidentiary abuse testimony “Slave Ship,” the Allmuseri’s “documenting” of suffering, survival, and the pursuit of restitution in a “worse than prison” carceral locale bespeaks an attainment of voice and a reconstitution

---

<sup>51</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990):132.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

of personhood. It is this capacity of the systematically-silenced abuse survivor to use the written word to attain voice and transform conditions of abusive captivity, however marginally, that is the subject of the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

#### **4. “With his pencil and his notebook, he tries to define his humanity”: The Voice of the Death Row Prisoner in Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying***

Jefferson is barely literate. He has never written a letter in his life. He was barely able to write his elementary school assignments. But now, with his pencil and his notebook, he tries to define his humanity—in the few days he has left to live.

—Ernest Gaines, “Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*”<sup>1</sup>

“Would it be possible for someone not kin of a condemned man who [is] not a minister of religion or his legal advisor to visit him on death row?”<sup>2</sup> Believe it or not, this question was posed and later reposed to a warden at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in the 1980s *not* by a death penalty opposition group or radical prisoners’ rights activist, but rather, by an author of African American fiction named Ernest Gaines. Although Gaines “has consistently denied having an interest in writing protest fiction,” there is something implicitly political about this query of his, a query that he would return to repeatedly during the early phases of writing his critically-acclaimed novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*.<sup>3</sup> Put simply, for Gaines, prisoners’ voices matter. Gaines’s sustained attention to prisoners’ voices in his fiction represents, I contend, his unacknowledged *political* intervention in issues related to the contemporary epoch’s mass incarceration system, such as racial bias and racialized prisoner abuse.

One of Gaines’s earliest short stories, “Three Men,” revolves around the jailhouse discussions of incarcerated black men, men who consider how the twentieth-century U.S.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Gaines, “Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*,” *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Beavers, “Allegory and Voice in *A Lesson Before Dying*,” *Contemporary Black Men’s Fiction and Drama*, ed. Keith Clark (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001): 149.

prison functions as a system of racialized social control continuous with the antebellum slave plantation. Gaines's second novel, *Of Love and Dust*, pays close attention to how an African American prisoner who is leased out to a plantation conceptualizes and contests state and private control of black penal labor. As noted in the epigraph above, much of Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* is about how its author imagines death row inmate Jefferson speaking out against his alleged criminality—how Jefferson, “with his pencil and his notebook...tries to define his humanity—in the few days he has left to live.” Gaines's implicitly political attentiveness to the voice of prisoner—the most systematically-silenced figure of our time—will be my focus in this chapter. I will begin by examining how Gaines's prisoners interpret the central roles that the law and racial prejudice play in their criminalization, economic exploitation, and abusive treatment, and thus how some of Gaines's early writings inform his characterization of Jefferson as critical commentator on the criminal justice system in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

#### **4.1 An Introduction to Gaines's Prisoner Abuse Narrative**

On the one hand, Gaines, who is known best for his 1993 award-winning novel *A Lesson Before Dying*, has authored numerous fiction works that bear witness to the way in which slavery's system of racialized social control lives on in the twentieth-century U.S. criminal justice system. Put differently, while Gaines, a native Southerner, is well aware of the Thirteenth Amendment's outlawing of slavery in 1865, his fiction demonstrates an even keener awareness of that particular law's exception: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime*, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject

to their jurisdiction.” Notably, Gaines has remarked that for the 1940s-era black characters he depicts in his works—as with African Americans who lived in the South during that time—slavery is nominally a thing of the past, but, yet and still, “things haven’t changed.”<sup>4</sup> To clarify: the prejudicial criminalization of black men and women by way of the Black Codes, the economic exploitation of these alleged convicts accomplished by state officials leasing their labor out to private companies, prison farms, and sharecropping plantations, and guards’ and overseers’ disciplinary use of violence on these criminalized persons, all signify, in Gaines’s real and imagined Louisiana, the disturbing continuation of slavery in twentieth-century terrains of punishment.<sup>5</sup> In fact, these racialized social control practices in the post-slavery American South are symptomatic of a condition that many scholars have described as either being “worse than slavery” or amounting to “the slavery of prison” and “slavery by another name.”<sup>6</sup> Gaines, responding to this condition, never depicts his prisoners’ bouts with criminalization, incarceration, or prisoner abuse as tragic or exceptional occurrences, but rather, as outcomes of systematic and undeniably racialized repression.

Consider, for instance, “Three Men,” a short story Gaines published in 1968.

Gaines’s jailed black protagonist Proctor Lewis attends to the wounds a fourteen-year-old

---

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 310.

<sup>5</sup> David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996): 20-22.

<sup>6</sup> David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Angela Y. Davis, “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison,” *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998): 74-95; Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

black boy receives from a group of white jail guards that one prisoner describes as “a bunch of pigs—dogs—philistines.”<sup>7</sup> While some of the prisoners are shocked, Proctor refuses to be stunned, and informs readers why: “I told myself...he ain’t the first one they ever beat and he won’t be the last one, and getting in it will just bring you a dose of the same medicine [...]. I hated what the law had done.”<sup>8</sup> Proctor’s attention to the power of “the law”—its power to both sanction state violence against a black teenager and overawe Proctor and other imprisoned onlookers into order—shows us just how attentive Gaines is to the prison system’s appropriation of slavery’s punishment practices. Not only does the attack that this youth suffers at the hands of multiple white male authorities go unpunished, but it is also spectacularized as exemplary punishment, as a violence that other prisoners must witness corporately and learn from: “Nobody had said a word since the guards throwed that little boy in the cell. Like a bunch of roaches, like a bunch of mices, they had crawled in they holes and pulled the cover over they head.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, just as overseers could, without legal punishment, instrumentalize brutality in order to discipline masses of enslaved persons in the antebellum South, Gaines helps us to see how the near-total impunity afforded the jail guard functions to legitimate prisoner abuse as a tool of institutional discipline in the twentieth-century U.S. penal facility.

Indeed, Proctor’s observations in “Three Men,” as well as those raised by characters in *Of Love and Dust*, *In My Father’s House*, and *A Lesson Before Dying*,

---

<sup>7</sup> Ernest Gaines, *Bloodline* (New York: Dial Press, 1968): 150.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

reveal Gaines's attentiveness to the way in which a system of racialized social control that was invented in the slave past persists in twentieth-century criminal justice practices such as racial profiling, police brutality, and prisoner abuse. Yet Gaines's oeuvre also illustrates the revolutionary expressions of voice and personhood that captive subjects cultivate while subjected to such systematized repression. In fact, the improvisational acts of self-refashioning accomplished by Gaines's prisoners show us how even within the state's most brutalizing regimes, detained and debilitated persons have undermined institutional agendas of depersonalization. Many of Gaines's incarcerated characters demonstrate what Gaines calls "the importance of standing [up]" against the disciplinary tactics of a white supremacist social order.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, in Gaines's 1967 novel, *Of Love and Dust*, when black convict Marcus Payne is bonded out of jail to a white plantation owner named Sidney Bonbon, Marcus makes such a stand by refusing to put on the fieldwork clothes and straw hat that sharecroppers are expected to wear—what he calls "that convict shit."<sup>11</sup> Marcus's seemingly ludicrous decision to don a short-sleeve silk shirt, dress pants, and low-cut dress shoes as he picks corn in the scorching Louisiana heat is the first of his many

---

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): xv. Katherine Daley and Carolyn M. Jones offer a helpful gloss of Gaines's discourse of standing:

Standing, for Gaines, means responsibility, striving, and exhibiting grace under pressure. From his aunt and from Hemingway, Gaines comes to understand what 'dignity under pressure' and 'survival with dignity' mean. Standing—and in *Lesson*, the additional act of kneeling—is done in a situation of oppression, of confinement. These acts call for integrity, reliability, strength, and determination—all of which make one good and contribute to community.

Katherine Daley and Carolyn M. Jones, "Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*: Freedom in Confined Spaces," *From Plantation to Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*, ed. Tara T. Green (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008): 84-85.

<sup>11</sup> Ernest Gaines, *Of Love and Dust* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967): 31.

ostentatious demonstrations against the repressive system responsible for his placement on the plantation. Put differently, Marcus makes a practice of dressing himself extravagantly upon learning that “bond people,” who are curiously all black, get treated like those exploited (and disproportionately black) laborers who were leased out to plantation owners and private corporations in the early twentieth-century convict-leasing system.<sup>12</sup> Ex-cons like Marcus receive no pay for their hours of sharecropping on a white-owned and white-operated plantation, and are required to work harder and longer than their non-criminalized counterparts. Marcus thus retaliates by wresting back control over the particulars of some aspect of his life—in this case, his work attire. Marcus consistently refuses to acquiesce to the plantation dress code because he believes doing so signifies compliance with laboring like “a contented old slave.”<sup>13</sup> Marcus’s clothing demonstrations represent, then, direct affronts to the penal institution, everyday acts of resistance that reinforce his most solemn declaration: “I’m a human being.”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines highlights how his falsely-charged black protagonist attains radical voice and reconstituted personhood even as he exposes the racial prejudice that brought about this character’s incarceration in the first place. In one of his most recent interviews, Gaines remarks that the decision made by this semi-illiterate character, Jefferson, to produce and clandestinely distribute a prison diary prior to his execution represents a battle cry against his systematic silencing, a valiant and ultimately successful attempt to, “within a few weeks of his death...identif[y] himself as

---

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Gaines, *Of Love and Dust* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967): 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 225.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 225.

a human being [and] say something...to show who he is.”<sup>15</sup> Not long before writing the chapter titled “Jefferson’s Diary,” Gaines described Jefferson’s self-refashioning strategy in his characteristic discourse of standing: “I know one thing. I’m going to give [Jefferson] a very good speech before [the execution] happens...he’s going to stand real tall and tell...what he thinks manliness is and citizenship [is] and what life is about.”<sup>16</sup> Jefferson’s “very good speech” is, of course, one he ultimately pens in his diary and passes on to the African American schoolteacher and community who inspire him to write.

This is how Jefferson, with his execution date fast approaching, bears a striking resemblance to the many imprisoned intellectuals who Angela Y. Davis has described as radically transforming terrains of punishment by “working the interstices between confinement, surveillance, control, and brutality.” Like these “men and women [who] have managed to invent subversive spaces within which to nurture their knowledge and creativity” while isolated in non-rehabilitative “correction” centers, Jefferson uses writing as a tool to reconstruct his public identity and reimagine possibilities for black male subjectivity while confined in a penal institution that seeks to thwart such personal and political development.<sup>17</sup> Like Willie Francis, the real-life death row prisoner whose abuse narrative and narrative techniques closely shadow his own, Jefferson utilizes the written word tactically. Jefferson becomes a death row writer in order to radically

---

<sup>15</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with Marcia Gaudet and Darrell Bourque, “A Literary Salon: Oyster/Shrimp Po’Boys, Chardonnay, and Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines,” *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 152.

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 239, 240.

<sup>17</sup> Angela Y. Davis, “Writing on the Wall: Prisoners on Punishment,” *Punishment and Society* 3.3 (2001): 427.

transform his construction as hog by the state, and defy jail administrators who wish for his execution to commence while he is still incarcerated: “Every moment for the rest of his life, he’s going to know he’s in jail, and he’s going to be here till the end. This ain’t no school.”<sup>18</sup>

In the pages that follow, I trace Gaines’s characterization of Jefferson as death row author to the autobiographical prisoner abuse narrative that haunted the production of *A Lesson Before Dying*: Willie Francis’s 1947 pamphlet, *My Trip to the Chair*. Though Gaines initially asserts that he set *A Lesson* in 1948 instead of 1947 precisely “because I didn’t want anyone to compare those two stories,” Gaines’s more recent statements indicate his desire to amplify Francis’s unique perspective on “what a person [goes] through, that week before, the day before, the night before, he must die.”<sup>19</sup> By excavating Gaines’s under-discussed personal witness of death-row imprisonment and prisoner execution as a young writer, and by carefully thinking through the language he uses to describe his horror and fascination with the unheard abuse testimonies of Francis and other death-row prisoners, I offer a reading of *A Lesson* that demonstrates just how profoundly Francis’s plight and literary production shadow Gaines’s characterization of Jefferson. Ultimately, I argue that Jefferson, like Francis, attains radical voice and reconstituted personhood at the height of his institutional subjection—during those final

---

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 134.

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 307; Ernest Gaines, interview with Dan Stone, “Ernest J. Gaines: *A Lesson Before Dying*,” 16 August 2007, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blUxGHeSfo>>.

weeks, days, and hours that he spends on death row, writing and selectively circulating his reassessments of his criminalized and racially-caricatured identity.

Moreover, as an examination of the criminal justice system that positions a guiltless casualty of capital punishment as a textual authority, I contend that *A Lesson Before Dying* is instructive for rethinking conventional stories of wrongful incarceration and wrongful execution. We frequently encounter such stories in human rights literature published by advocacy organizations like the Innocence Project, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Death Penalty Information Center. Because the authors of these stories rarely attend to former or current death row prisoners' thoughts regarding their construction by the state as innately criminal subjects, they tend to overlook how these prisoners view the justice system and how they view themselves. Additionally, these reporters tend to neglect how the writing act represents, for these civilly-dead and death-bound prisoners, an insurgent declaration of personhood—a testament to their attainment of voice within a regime designed to systematically silence them. I argue that Gaines, by depicting a semi-illiterate death row inmate whose prison diary expresses his unforeseen realization of voice and reconstituted personhood, liberates his protagonist from such social scientism, imbues him with the vitality of subjective experience, and thus demonstrates the radical utility of literary studies in contemporary critical explorations of the criminal justice system.

## 4.2 *A Lesson* as Gaines's Pained Witness of Death Row Prisoners

### I

In her important study, *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*, Mary Ellen Doyle makes the case, quite convincingly, that *A Lesson Before Dying* stands out from Gaines's other five novels. For Doyle, *A Lesson*'s complicated plotline and careful development of Gaines's earlier character types cause the novel to come off as "emotionally more demanding" than any of his previous fiction narratives.<sup>20</sup> While I can agree with Doyle on this first point, I find it far more difficult to concur with the second thread of her argument: that the characterization of *A Lesson*'s protagonist is not, as in Gaines's prior works, a shadow of someone he saw or knew during the many years he's lived in Louisiana. It is no secret that the Pelican State's rural locales have provided Gaines with the primary source material—the landscape, people, mores, and racial/ethnic conflicts—for his entire body of work. Gaines, in fact, calls the distinctive characters, stories, and storytelling practices that appear in his short stories and novels a response to "this Louisiana thing that drives me."<sup>21</sup> Gaines was raised by his crippled great aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, on a sugarcane plantation in Point Coupee Parish, Louisiana, during the 1930s and 40s. There, Gaines spent his formative years listening to spirited storytellers—usually family members and neighbors—who would exchange testimonies and folktales about love, loss, struggle, tradition, tragedy, and redemption. Gaines points out that storytelling was a valued form of recreation for his aunt Augusteen and nearly

---

<sup>20</sup> Mary Ellen Doyle, *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002): 204.

<sup>21</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 87.

everyone who lived in their parish: “I come from a plantation, where people told stories by the fireplace at night, people told stories on the ditch bank...people sat around telling stories. Since Auntie could not go to their place, they would come to ours. They would talk and talk and talk, and I listened to them.”<sup>22</sup> While Gaines has often insisted that his aunt was not the only or even primary influence for his character Miss Jane, the centenarian black female storyteller in his novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines has also admitted, “*maybe* I had [Aunt Augusteen] in mind when I was writing about [Miss Jane].”<sup>23</sup> Juxtaposed with Gaines’s proud description of his elderly great aunt, the lucid memory of Miss Jane seems at least partially indebted to the incredible recall Gaines says his aunt possessed: “My aunt...was...a recorder; she could tell about what happened in the past. She remembered quite well...Miss Jane has my aunt’s spirit and courage.”<sup>24</sup>

As it concerns his construction of other characters in his oeuvre, Gaines has been more forthcoming about the influences of his Louisiana community. Gaines has spoken at length about how his friend Lionel’s bravado partially inspired his creation of Marcus Payne, the black convict in *Of Love and Dust* who is jailed for killing a man in a bar

---

<sup>22</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 58.

<sup>23</sup> Ernest Gaines, “Miss Jane and I,” *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 22, emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 58; Ernest Gaines, interview with the Academy of Achievement, “Interview: Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*,” 4 May 2001, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/gai0int-1>>.

fight, and who openly rejects racial hierarchies on the plantation to which he's bonded out:

I wanted for Marcus to be sort of with the 'gab' of Muhammad Ali, and at the same time *I wanted him to be somewhat like a guy I actually knew...* this guy lived in Baton Rouge, one of these Creole guys. And he was tough; this guy really was tough...he got into a fight [at a bar] in Baton Rouge, and two guys jumped him, and he got his knife out, and he killed one of the guys. [He] was sent up for seven years in Angola, but he got out in five...He'd walk into any bar and say, 'I'll whip any man in the bar. Anybody want to fight me?' And I'd say, 'Lionel, don't start that.' And he'd say, 'You scared.'...Marcus was sort of based on him.<sup>25</sup>

Gaines adds that seeing his friend Lionel "put on a farm to work his time out" also "had an influence" on how he constructed Marcus's life story and Marcus's response to a system of racially-exploitative labor.<sup>26</sup> Gaines recounts that Lionel was, like Marcus, manipulated into a deal in which he would "spen[d] twice as much time on the plantation than he would have spent in the penitentiary...working just as hard, and maybe even harder."<sup>27</sup> In other interviews, Gaines reveals that the storytelling practices and speech patterns of elderly black male characters in his novel *A Gathering of Old Men* were informed by the many conversations he shared with aging African American men from his parish:

[I was] talking with Mr. Zeno, to whom I dedicated *A Gathering of Old Men*...listening to him talk about different people and what had gone on...the strength in people...I was just talking to [him and] these old men and they were

---

<sup>25</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with Marcia Gaudet and Darrell Bourque, "A Literary Salon: Oyster/Shrimp Po'Boys, Chardonnay, and Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines," *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, ed. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 149-150, emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>27</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 7.

all talking about how brave someone else was...I could have never written...*A Gathering of Old Men* had I not lived it.<sup>28</sup>

Given Gaines's tendency toward drawing from personal witness in the characters that he creates, I wish to put pressure on Doyle's claim about the character Jefferson in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. Doyle writes that *A Lesson* "seems, from [Gaines's] interviews, to have begun in his imagination of a character he had *never* encountered, a convict sentenced to die."<sup>29</sup> Yet, when we remember how deeply characterization and plot in Gaines's previous novels are indebted to his role as witness, I argue that Gaines *had* to have known, heard about, or beheld a death row prisoner prior to writing *A Lesson*.

On the one hand, I cannot deny that Doyle's statement is, in light of one of Gaines's early interviews on *A Lesson Before Dying*, a logical one. In Gaines's interview with John Lowe, he is very open about how his personal relationships with a number of sheriffs, prison guards, probation officers, and policemen (including some who are family members) inform his depictions of law enforcement figures in the novel, but never once mentions having personal contact with a death row prisoner as he created Jefferson, his novel's death-sentenced protagonist.<sup>30</sup> The closest it seems that Gaines came to making such a connection happened when he wrote to an Angola prison warden on several occasions, seeking—unsuccessfully—the opportunity to meet with a condemned man

---

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with Marcia Gaudet and Darrell Bourque, "A Literary Salon: Oyster/Shrimp Po'Boys, Chardonnay, and Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines," *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, ed. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 271, 272, 217.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Ellen Doyle, *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002): 204, 205, emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> Ernest Gaines, *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 326.

awaiting execution there.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in his interview with William Parrill, Gaines's many questions about death row prisoners would seem to indicate his utter unfamiliarity with life on death row:

I want to know exactly what the [death row] prison cells looked like in the forties and fifties. I want to know what kind of clothes the prisoners wore, what kind of food they ate, what kind of exercise they took. I want to know if there were windows...How did blacks communicate with each other when the guards were around? How can [I] make [my imprisoned protagonist] here a true human being?<sup>32</sup>

I contend, however, that despite the many telling signs that Jefferson is, as Doyle presumes, "a character [Gaines] had never encountered," Gaines's evasive response to one of Lowe's questions counters such a conclusion. When Lowe asks Gaines why he chose to set the novel in 1948 and not when he'd originally planned—in 1988—Gaines alludes to the botched electrocution and second death-sentencing of a black teenager named Willie Francis, a young man whose story Gaines later confesses "appeared familiar to me":<sup>33</sup>

[1948 is] the year I left [Louisiana for California]. And you know, something had happened about a year or so before that—this young man had been sentenced to the electric chair twice—I think it was in 46 or 47. Because the chair had failed to work properly the first time. And so I was working around those years...I didn't want to put in 47 because I didn't want anyone to compare those two stories. And I have received letters from different people—attorneys and even ministers—who remember that execution in 1947, and they have asked if I had it in my mind

---

<sup>31</sup> Ernest Gaines, "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*," *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 52.

<sup>32</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 199.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Gaines, "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*," *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 53.

when I was writing the book. What I did learn from that incident was that the state had had a portable electric chair.<sup>34</sup>

Here, Gaines is noticeably cagey regarding whether Francis's tragic story entered his creative consciousness while he wrote *A Lesson*. Gaines curiously focuses his discussion on the technical specificities of the chair that killed Francis, as opposed to the racial injustice and national outrage surrounding this young man's *two* electrocutions: "they could run wires [through the chair] through the window [on] the night before [the execution]." <sup>35</sup> Gaines's complete silence about the brutality and exceptionality of Francis's plight—Francis was the first victim of a failed electrocution in the United States, and a black youth from rural Louisiana whose death sentence resulted from a racially-biased arrest and trial—seems strange. *Gaines never even mentions Francis's name during this interview*. Yet if Gaines indeed "received letters...from attorneys" regarding similarities between Francis's and Jefferson's experiences, there is no doubt that "Willie Francis" would have been a name he knew well.

In "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*," an essay that Gaines published many years after his interview with Lowe, he reveals just how well he remembers Francis—and the racial bias surrounding Francis's murder conviction, death-sentencing, and two electrocutions. Though Gaines still avoids using Francis's name, he confesses that while he was in the beginning stages of writing *A Lesson*, Paul Nolan, a professor who he taught with at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, provided him with reading material

---

<sup>34</sup> Ernest Gaines qtd. in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995): 307.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 307.

on Francis's case that unsettled him, touched him, and shaped how he ultimately chose to portray his novel's protagonist:

Paul told me he realized that...I might benefit by reading [about Francis's] case and that he had a lot of material about the case if I would like to do so. This particular case...appeared familiar to me...[It] happened only a few miles from where I was now teaching and no more than seventy miles from where I had lived as a child and the area where most of my previous stories had taken place. There were so many similarities—the work, religion, the food the people ate, everything...The stories (Francis's and Jefferson's) are different, but *I...use some of the information from the [Francis] case. Both young men are black. Both nearly illiterate. Both were involved in the murder of a white man...No defense witnesses were called in either case. Only white men served on the juries.*<sup>36</sup>

Just as Gaines recalls the stories and speech patterns of his aunt Augusteen, his friend Lionel, and the elderly black men in his parish to help him create characters in his previous novels, he draws from his distanced witness of Willie Francis in order to create Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Though there is no evidence to date indicating that Gaines knew Francis personally, it is clear from Gaines's "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*" that he indeed connected to Francis's story in a very personal way. First, it's clear that Gaines actually remembers who Francis was because he remarks that, upon reading about Francis's plight, Francis "appeared familiar" to him. Moreover, Gaines is mindful not only of Francis's close geographical proximity—Francis's trial and execution took place "no more than seventy miles from where I had lived as a child"—but also of the experiential proximity they shared as young black men in rural Louisiana where segregation, the racialization of crime, and the pervasiveness of white supremacy made

---

<sup>36</sup> Ernest Gaines, "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*," *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 53-54, emphasis mine.

them prime targets for criminalization, incarceration, and execution: “[Francis’s] case...could have happened in the parish where I grew up.”<sup>37</sup>

From this angle, it is not at all surprising that Gaines finds it necessary to “use some of the information from the Francis case,” his reading material from Paul Nolan, and his conversations with Francis’s defense lawyer, Bertrand DeBlanc, to aid in his construction of his death-sentenced protagonist in *A Lesson*.<sup>38</sup> The story of the youthful, unlettered, black Louisiana prisoner in Gaines’s acclaimed novel is indeed indebted to the life story of an actual prisoner who Gaines had come to know—though, at a distance. Recalling again Doyle’s observation that *A Lesson Before Dying* “seems...to have begun in [Gaines’s] imagination of a character he had *never* encountered,” I argue that future Gaines scholarship can be advanced most meaningfully by turning our attention to how the life and literary production of Willie Francis, a young, black, prejudicially-convicted, and semi-illiterate Louisiana death row inmate, shadows that of Gaines’s Jefferson. The sections that follow represent what I hope is a fruitful attempt at such a progression.

## II

My new reading of *A Lesson Before Dying* begins by examining Gaines’s very emotional discussions of the novel in his interviews with the Academy of Achievement and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the 2000s. Exclusively in these interviews, Gaines speaks out about how his distanced witness of death row prisoners

---

<sup>37</sup> Ernest Gaines, “Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*,” *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 53.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 58-59.

inspired the questions that would compel him to write an execution narrative, a narrative whose widespread admiration is evidenced by its winning a National Book Critics Circle Award and being placed on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club. Reflecting on his days as a young writer in San Francisco, which found him living in full view of the notorious San Quentin prison, Gaines tells NEA interviewer Dan Stone that he was so terrified by the frequency of prisoner executions in California that writing about capital punishment from the viewpoint of the punished became the only way he could safeguard his sanity:

I was horrified by executions at, at, at San Quentin. [They] always happened on a Tuesday at 10 o'clock in the morning. I used to just leave the house, my apartment...and walk to the ocean. I lived about four, four and half miles from the ocean. And so I'd go to the ocean just to get away from everything. I didn't want to see anybody, talk to anybody, until I [was] sure the execution was over. And then I would...come back home and just...sit there all day...and I think this is what drove me to writing *A Lesson Before Dying*. [I wrote] because of these nightmares and nightmares about execution. What did, what did a person go through, that week before...the day before, the night before, he was to die? W-w-what was in, w-what was, what was...in his mind?<sup>39</sup>

During this segment of the video-recorded interview, Gaines's labored pauses (represented here by ellipses), repetitions ("at, at, at San Quentin"), stammering ("W-what was in, w-what was..."), and trembling voice all indicate how deeply these executions affected him. Moreover, there is no other moment in the interview in which Gaines stutters or falls into such unsettling, mid-sentence silences. Gaines, in other words, is assuredly *still* affected by his distanced witness of these prisoner executions. Off-camera, Gaines remarks that while he was still in San Francisco, his relentless "nightmares about execution" became increasingly more personal: he would envision himself, his family members, and even close friends walking to their deaths in the San

---

<sup>39</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with Dan Stone, "Ernest J. Gaines: *A Lesson Before Dying*," 16 August 2007, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIaUxGHeSfo>>.

Quentin gas chamber.<sup>40</sup> In his interview with the Academy of Achievement, Gaines adds that he could not sleep well for years because images of death-bound prisoners and execution acts had invaded his conscious and unconscious daily life. Writing turned out to be the only way Gaines could make sense of these hauntings. “Whenever there was an execution, I could not write...I couldn’t do anything, [because I was] trying to imagine what this person was going through...I realized that in order to try to get rid of this, to exorcise this, I had to try to write about it.”<sup>41</sup> Gaines thus reveals that his early phases of writing *A Lesson Before Dying* began as therapeutic exercise—as a method by which he could come to terms with witnessing and remembering executions at San Quentin.

I wish to emphasize here an interesting tension between Gaines’s two reactions to witnessing state killings, because it is precisely this tension that reappears in the plot of *A Lesson Before Dying*. My examination of Gaines’s recent interviews reveals that while Gaines was obviously disturbed by the cruelty and ceaselessness of execution, he was also drawn to the potentially revolutionary stories that people tell or write from death row. More to the point, Gaines was indeed “horrified” by the sight and thought of capital punishment, but at the same time, he was interested in how prisoners’ might reconstitute their personhood in the face of certain death. This was why Gaines, dissatisfied with news reporters’ reductive coverage of prisoner executions, began reading literary works that foregrounded prisoners’ perspectives on capital punishment—works like Lenoid

---

<sup>40</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with Dan Stone, “Ernest J. Gaines: *A Lesson Before Dying*,” 16 August 2007, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIaUxGHeSfo>>.

<sup>41</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with the Academy of Achievement, “Interview: Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*,” 4 May 2001, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/gai0int-1>>.

Andreyev's *The Seven Who Were Hanged*.<sup>42</sup> This was why Gaines was so intent on receiving an opportunity to speak with a death row prisoner at Angola while writing *A Lesson*. Haunted by the life stories of death row prisoners at San Quentin and executed inmate Willie Francis, Gaines wanted to know, had to know: "What did a person go through, that week before...the day before, the night before, he was to die? W-w-what was in, w-what was, what was...in his mind?" Approaching the heralded chapter in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* titled "Jefferson's Diary" with this previously unconsidered authorial backstory, I will argue that Gaines's attentiveness to the voice of the death row inmate influences his creation of a death-bound subject who, like Francis, uses the written word to reconstruct his public identity and reimagine possibilities for black male subjectivity from within a non-rehabilitative carceral locale.

### **4.3 *A Lesson's* Revivifying Prisoner Abuse Narrative & Its Shadow**

#### III

According to even Gaines's most recent essays and interviews, he did not access Willie Francis's pamphlet *My Trip to the Chair* while writing any part of *A Lesson Before Dying*. It is unlikely that Gaines even had access to Francis's pamphlet at the time that he was working on his *magnum opus*. *My Trip to the Chair*, which began as an oral testimony that Francis shared with a man named Sam Montgomery, is a rare document

---

<sup>42</sup> Ernest Gaines, interview with the Academy of Achievement, "Interview: Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*," 4 May 2001, 16 February 2012  
<<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/gai0int-1>>.

held in the U.S. Library of Congress—a seventeen-page manuscript that researchers have only been able to get their hands on very recently.<sup>43</sup> But in light of what I’ve exhumed regarding Gaines’s horror and fascination with the stories of death row prisoners, I contend that in order for scholars to advance criticism on Jefferson’s diary, a phonetically-transcribed prison text that similarly resulted from dialogues between a black prisoner and a sympathetic jail visitor, we must explore how Willie Francis *and his pamphlet* haunt Jefferson’s life story and literary production in Gaines’s novel. What follows is my own contribution to this urgent critical labor.

At the opening of *A Lesson*, readers discover that Jefferson is an unwitting accomplice to a drugstore robbery that ends in a deadly shootout between his acquaintances, Brother and Bear, and the store’s owner, a white Cajun man by the name of Alcee Gropé. Jefferson, the only survivor of the gunfight, is so paralyzed by confusion and fear that he never leaves the store. As he tries to decide on his next move, he babbles, “It wasn’t me!” to a dying Gropé, stuffs his pockets with cash, takes a swig out of a whisky bottle—and is soon seized by two white men (policemen?) who enter the store.<sup>44</sup> Given his curious appearance as a young black man in a scene of interracial homicide in the segregated South, it is unsurprising that Jefferson is swiftly arrested and charged with murder. Moreover, to add gendered insult to racial injury, Jefferson’s trial, conviction, and execution constitute nothing less than a ritualistic lynching, as Carlyle

---

<sup>43</sup> I am indebted to Eric Frazier of the Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., for providing me access to Francis’s pamphlet, *My Trip to the Chair*. Gilbert King, a historian who published a 2008 study of Francis’s execution, emphasizes just how hard it has been to access *My Trip to the Chair*. Prior to a representative from the Library of Congress contacting King, King writes that the “only known copy [of the pamphlet] had been catalogued in a file of rare African American pamphlets at the Library of Congress...but it had been missing for almost two decades.” Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): xi.

<sup>44</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 5, 6.

Van Thompson has recently argued.<sup>45</sup> Not only is Jefferson, a 21-year-old black man, physiologically dissected and publically shamed by the racist, animalistic, and eugenicist rhetoric of a white prosecutor and his white defense attorney—this state-appointed attorney calls him a hog whose skull shape predetermined his foolish acts of theft and post-homicide loitering—he is also denied anything close to a jury of his peers, and is made to die before a white supremacist crowd that leaps at this opportunity “to put an old bad nigger away.”<sup>46</sup> Grant Wiggins, a black schoolteacher who visits Jefferson, is incensed as he reflects on Jefferson’s unsettlingly predictable death-sentencing, as well as the pervasiveness of racial injustice in the criminal justice system:

Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice?...They sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened. Yet six months later they come and unlock your cage and tell you, We, us, white folks all, have decided it’s time for you to die, because this is the convenient date and time.<sup>47</sup>

For the purposes of my argument, I emphasize here the degree to which the racial bias surrounding Jefferson’s capture, trial, and death-sentencing parallels the prejudicial treatment to which Willie Francis was subjected before and after his murder conviction—which also involved the lethal shooting of a white pharmacy owner in rural Louisiana. I’m arguing, in other words, that we must not forget the fact that Gaines reworked the details of Jefferson’s story *after* he read up on Francis’s case and learned the specifics of

---

<sup>45</sup> Carlyle Van Thompson, *Black Outlaws: Race, Law, and Male Subjectivity in African American Literature and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010): 135-178.

<sup>46</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 242.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 157, 158.

Francis's situation from his defense lawyer. When seventeen-year-old Francis was sent to the electric chair in 1946 for his alleged murder of Andrew Thomas in St. Martinsville, Louisiana, black *and* white townspeople attested to the suspicious circumstances and outright racial discrimination that surrounded his arrest and conviction.<sup>48</sup> Francis had had no previous run-ins with the law, and, as historian Gilbert King and legal scholar Deborah Denno have revealed, white policemen had coerced Francis into writing a murder confession.<sup>49</sup> This confession would later be used as evidence of Francis's guilt despite the fact that Francis's near-illiteracy was a clear indication that someone other than him had written the very formal confession. Given his familiarity with the legal documents related to Francis's case, Gaines would have been well aware that Francis faced an all-white, all-male jury with insufficient legal counsel, and was sentenced to death despite there being no defined motive to kill and no fingerprints or other incriminating evidence found on the weapon used in the crime.<sup>50</sup> While Francis's complete innocence was indeed debatable since personal items belonging to the murder victim were found on his person, it is clear that Francis, like Gaines's Jefferson, was put to death not because of his beyond-reasonable-doubt culpability, but rather because of what legal scholar Charles Ogletree describes as "the presumption of guilt."<sup>51</sup> More to

---

<sup>48</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 18, 89-90.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 70, 86-88; Deborah W. Denno, "When Willie Francis Died: The 'Disturbing' Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment's Most Enduring Standards of Risk," *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 32-34.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 72, 85; Deborah W. Denno, "When Willie Francis Died: The 'Disturbing' Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment's Most Enduring Standards of Risk," *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 30.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Ogletree, *The Presumption of Guilt: The Arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Race, Class, and Crime in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

the point, because a white man had been murdered in the Jim Crow South and a black man was suspected to have been involved, the certainty of that black man's guilt and death had been determined long before the passing down of a verdict. This was unwritten law in a white supremacist social order.<sup>52</sup>

To return *A Lesson Before Dying*, though, we must remember that the execution narrative Gaines writes is not one of racially-motivated arrest as much as it is one about a black youth who is *assuredly* innocent of murder. Jefferson, after all, is a hardworking, soft-spoken waterboy whose encounter with the electric chair seems unjust in every way imaginable. Widespread condemnation of Francis's execution, on the other hand, did not come until he suffered the agony of the chair and, despite his limbs tensing with pain and his lips puffing out profusely, he miraculously survived—and was condemned to endure its tormenting current a second time.<sup>53</sup> What ultimately links Francis and Jefferson's execution narratives, then, is the life-or-death necessity that surrounds their personal retelling of them—a political necessity that Anne Gray Brown brilliantly discusses in her reading of *A Lesson* as Jefferson's dire need to change himself “from victim to survivor” before he is killed by the state.<sup>54</sup> I am arguing that the most profound way in which Francis haunts the plight and literary production of Gaines's protagonist lies in the

---

<sup>52</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 73; Deborah W. Denno, “When Willie Francis Died: The ‘Disturbing’ Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment’s Most Enduring Standards of Risk,” *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 40.

<sup>53</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 24-25; Deborah W. Denno, “When Willie Francis Died: The ‘Disturbing’ Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment’s Most Enduring Standards of Risk,” *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 43-44, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Gray Brown, “Writing for Life: ‘Jefferson’s Diary’ as Transformative Text in Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*,” *Southern Quarterly* 47.1 (2009): 34.

urgency and immediacy that surround his death row writing. In order to be remembered as he desired to be remembered, Francis's writing, like Jefferson's, had to testify of his positive self-concept and capacity to empower others at a moment when the state already deemed him dead. In other words, Francis had to write *My Trip to the Chair* in order to establish counterevidence against a public record which deemed him intrinsically criminal, functionally illiterate, and deprived of communal significance. Especially during this era in which segregation and the criminal justice system functioned as interdependent methods for silencing black voices, Francis, like Jefferson, had to tell his own story about his case and life in order to radically reconstruct his public identity—in order to remove the “black bastard” and “Negro Murderer” brandings he had received from the state, and articulate himself as the articulate and communally-conscious thinker he knew himself to be.<sup>55</sup> In a white supremacist social order, the written word would be Francis's most unforeseeable and therefore most effective secret weapon.

Again, in order to avoid being read as either a hardened criminal or voiceless victim—in order to live and die with a sense of dignity—Francis and Jefferson create and circulate narratives about how they view themselves, the justice system, and their communities, and also how they reconstitute their personhood in the face of institutionalized death. In the sections that follow, I will argue that while Jefferson's prison diary and Francis's pamphlet *My Trip to the Chair* implicitly attest to the devastating consequences of systematic racial injustice, they ultimately emphasize the communally-facilitated survival rather than the individualized victimization of their

---

<sup>55</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 17, 29.

authors. As Jefferson and Francis make time during their death row confinement to think about who they are and who they are not, they use the written word to pass judgment on a criminal justice system that has passed judgment on them, and thus establish a record of their rationality within a Jim Crow society that deems them incapable of meaningful thought. Moreover, Jefferson and Francis's prison writings function to revivify these young black men who the state presumes to be dead even before their executions.

In my examinations of Jefferson and Francis's prison texts, texts I will hereafter refer to as revivifying prisoner abuse narratives, I will be attentive to two distinct ways in which these men affirm their personhood prior to execution. I will consider how Jefferson and Francis, by assuming the authorial role, (1) dismantle white supremacist conceptions of their identity, and (2) write into existence their desired self-images, which are inspired by their intentional engagements with compassionate communities. For clarification, I add that the radicality that I read in the twilight surfacing of Jefferson and Francis's critical voices depends not on their occupation of an overtly political positionality (as is the case, for instance, with the prolific death-row author Mumia Abu-Jamal), but rather on the implicitly political nature of death-row writing. We come to understand Jefferson and Francis as political actors, in other words, as a direct consequence of their decisions to represent themselves as knowledgeable and communally-conscious teachers during the time of their most intense institutional subjection—in the months, weeks, and days before their very racialized and spectacularized executions.

#### IV

In Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson's ability to see the eve of electrocution as a teachable moment—to see beyond, in other words, the racial terror of his fast-approaching execution—compels him to become a committed prison diarist. The scales begin to fall away from Jefferson's eyes during a discussion he has with Grant Wiggins, a college-educated black instructor who often remarks that he teaches his black students only what whites want them to know. Grant cries out to Jefferson on one of the occasions that he visits him in jail:

I need you more than you could ever need me... White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth... The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, *and think*, and show the common humanity in us all... I want you to chip away at that myth by standing.<sup>56</sup>

Implicit in Grant's call for Jefferson to "stand" and reveal the fictitiousness of racial myth is a charge that Jefferson do the rigorous thinking that Grant cannot do by himself. Though Grant is the teacher by trade, though he has been called on by his aunt Lou and Jefferson's godmother Miss Emma to "make [Jefferson] know he's ... a man," Grant needs Jefferson to draw from the immediacy of his confrontation with unjust execution to teach *him* how to think, live, and be a man.<sup>57</sup> Grant cries out to Jefferson because, as Gaines remarks, Grant is "also a prisoner of his environment."<sup>58</sup> He is disgruntled with having to teach at an intentionally understaffed and under-resourced plantation school in the segregated South. Moreover, Grant insists that the humiliation he endures from

---

<sup>56</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 193, 192, emphasis mine.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>58</sup> Ernest Gaines, "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*," *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young (New York: Knopf, 2005): 57.

whites and the high expectations placed on him by blacks add to his daily agony, so much so that he wishes he “could just run away.”<sup>59</sup> As Jefferson begins to empathize with Grant, he cries in his presence. Grant remarks that even after he had stopped talking, he knew “something was touched, something deep down in [Jefferson]—because he was still crying.”<sup>60</sup> It is at this moment, I contend, that Jefferson shows his first signs of understanding how desperately Grant and the black community need him to stand up for them—how desperately they need him to show Jim Crow society that a semi-illiterate black convict cannot only “think” but also complicate a Westernized epistemology of what constitutes meaningful thought.

Grant’s charge, remember, is that Jefferson use his intellect to chip away at a racial myth invented by white people: “I need you...to... stand, *and think*, and show [them] the common humanity in us all.” I am arguing that Jefferson’s eventual decisions to write and posthumously pass on his prison diary ultimately make available the record of his thinking that is the symbolic stand against white supremacy. The diary—and Jefferson’s end-of-life distribution of it—is a testament to Jefferson, Grant, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, the black community, and the racist criminal justice system that he has transcended the “hog” status to which he was reduced in a Jim Crow courtroom. Moreover, Grant’s attention here to how Jefferson’s writing functions as a display of “the common humanity in us all” resonates with Henry Louis Gates’s famed argument in *The Signifying Monkey*. There, Gates makes the case that even as nineteenth-century enslaved and/or unlettered blacks began to situate their literary practice outside of

---

<sup>59</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 94.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

Western traditions, they also understood that the writings they published in an Enlightenment-minded U.S. culture would be read as irrefutable evidence of their unforeseen humanity.<sup>61</sup> Jefferson's decision to keep a prison diary must be understood, I contend, as a very similar battle cry, a cry which Grant attempts to give voice to as he witnesses Jefferson sobbing before him so uncontrollably: "I cry, not from reaching any conclusion by reasoning, but because, lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole. Is that what he was thinking as he looked at me crying?"<sup>62</sup>

Working from Grant's hypothesis, I contend that Jefferson's tears testify that he understands the great promise and pressure that will accompany his decision to take up his cross—the pen and notebook—and demonstrate his unexpected capacity to think, and think critically. Though the cross that Jefferson is called to bear is a particularly heavy one, Jefferson cries because he knows of its potential, if borne correctly, to not only transform him, but to also positively transform the psyches of his fellow sufferers—African American men, women, and children who find themselves unjustly confined in the prison of segregation. Jefferson's awareness of this tension between personal struggle and communal uplift becomes apparent both through the profuseness of his tears and through the agonized comments he directs to Grant during their next visit:

Y'all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing...I'm the one got to do everything, Mr. Wiggins, I'm the one...Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan's cross, my own cross. Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y'all axe a lot Mr. Wiggins...Who ever car'd my cross, Mr. Wiggins? My mama? My daddy? They dropped me when I wasn't nothing. Still don't know where they at this minute. I went in the

---

<sup>61</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 129.

<sup>62</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 194.

field when I was six, driving that old water cart. I done pulled that cotton sack, I done cut cane, load cane, swung the ax, chop ditch banks, since I was six...now all y'all want me to be better than ever'body else. How, Mr. Wiggins? You tell me.<sup>63</sup>

With this passage in mind, I argue that *everything* Jefferson writes in his diary is implicitly political, or, to invoke Gaines, demonstrative of an emblematic stand. With each entry that Jefferson writes, he makes a stand for his people and a stand against the unjust justice system that brands him an unthinking “hog,” the Jim Crow society that intends for him to be “a poor old nigger who never [has] nothing,” the segregationists who call him “an old bad nigger,” and the jail administration that tells him that jail “ain’t no school.”<sup>64</sup> Each time the semi-illiterate Jefferson decides to pick up his pencil, open his notebook, and record his thoughts on God, racism, justice, injustice, manhood, love, humanity, and community, he demonstrates both his unforeseen ability to think *and* his unexpected capacity for interrogating the ways in which others think. Whereas he has previously spent his days slumped in the corner of his cell, eating food off the floor on his hands and knees while calling himself an “old hog,” when Jefferson engages in writing his prison diary, he initiates a regimen of critical reflection that mystifies the jail administration and motivates Grant and the black community.<sup>65</sup>

For instance, even prior to what Gaines calls the “uplift” chapter in *A Lesson*—the chapter titled “Jefferson’s Diary”—Jefferson pens a diary entry that captures his schoolteacher’s attention not because of its grammatical incorrectness, but because of the

---

<sup>63</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 222, 223, 224.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 242, 134.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

way in which Jefferson critiques the illogic inherent in the state's construction of him as hog. Grant is, in fact, so fascinated by Jefferson's criticisms that he reads the entry "over a second time before closing the notebook," and, awestruck, confesses that he "didn't know what to say" to Jefferson. Grant's gloss of Jefferson's entry is as follows: "*If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog? Starb me like a hog? More erasing, then: man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs.*"<sup>66</sup> I emphasize Jefferson's attention here to the preposterousness of being branded a hog because his questions demonstrate how white men who repeatedly refer to him as such—men like Sheriff Guidry—neglect how the liberties that they simultaneously extend to him fly in the face of this hog status. Jefferson, that is to say, though quite candid about the deplorable conditions he lives in as he awaits his execution—he thunders that "Youmans don't stay in no stall like this!" as he reflects on his extended solitary confinement in a cell in need of much cleaning and repair—also realizes that he has not been starved or stricken by his institutional overseers, as hogs are, before being slaughtered.<sup>67</sup> The weightiness of Jefferson's words becomes apparent, I contend, when we recall the nature of hog slaughters. In the weeks leading up to their slaughter, hogs are usually castrated (if they are male), starved, and then rendered unconscious by a gunshot wound or electric current.<sup>68</sup> Jefferson, speaking in loosely metaphorical terms

---

<sup>66</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 220.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>68</sup> Craig W. Snyder, "An Old Fashioned Hog Slaughter," *Mother Earth News* 1 September 1982, 16 February 2012 <<http://www.motherearthnews.com/Sustainable-Farming/1982-09-01/An-Old-Fashioned-Hog-Slaughter.aspx>>.

(“man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs”), intimates that instead of denying him the sustenance of communal fellowship and educational engagement as he prepares to be killed, jail administrators like Sheriff Guidry call him a “hog” and yet—by extending him the freedom to be “fed” by the visitation of members of his black community—assure the cultivation of his literacy, intellectual sure-footedness, and political consciousness on the eve of his execution.

Put simply, hogs are not given the chance to grow before they are slaughtered. Jefferson, though, in recognizing the liminal freedom he is afforded in a racially-segregated Louisiana jail—that is, the right to be visited by his supporters, and the right to develop his literacy and exchange life lessons with a college-degreed black educator attests to the state’s recognition, however unintentional, of his potential for growth and transformation. I am arguing that by permitting Jefferson to educate and be educated by Grant, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose, and the town’s black schoolchildren before he dies, the jail administration does far more than contradict Jefferson’s hog status. Their actions implicitly sanction the transformation of Jefferson’s cell into a seminar room, thereby departing from an American penal history in which, as Mark Kann and Angela Davis have demonstrated, prison administrations have refused to invest or even believe in the possibility of rehabilitating black male criminals.<sup>69</sup> Jefferson’s first diary entry, as I have shown, bespeaks his awareness of this profound irony, an irony which he points out in a later entry in which he boasts that the jail administration

---

<sup>69</sup> Mark Kann, “Penitence for the Privileged: Manhood, Race, and Penitentiaries in Early America,” *Prison Masculinities*, eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 28-31; Angela Y. Davis, “Race, Gender, and Prison History: From the Convict Lease System to the Supermax Prison,” *Prison Masculinities*, eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 35-45.

authorizes Henri Pichot, a racist white plantation owner, to bring him “a brand new pencil” that Pichot sharpens for him at his request.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the unlettered Jefferson’s documentation and circulation of such critical thinking represents evidence not only of his literacy development, but also of his radical political expressivity, his facility with “pass[ing] judgments on the judicial system that convicted him,” as Valerie Babb has observed.<sup>71</sup>

Jefferson’s first prison diary entry, then, represents the first element of what I’ve called a revivifying prisoner abuse narrative because in it, Jefferson is obviously engaged in dismantling white supremacist conceptions of his identity. He clearly chips away at the racial myth of his “hog” status in his diary’s opening pages. Jefferson continues this dismantling work in the entries that follow. To fully grasp how he does this, we must first examine the extent to which Jefferson is aware of his construction as anti-masculine, as being not only outside the realm of normative (read: white patriarchal) masculinity, but also as being relegated to a subhuman universe against which that normative masculinity measures itself: the realm of the animal, the object, and the commodity. We must recall that Jefferson, a young black man, is not only entered into court records as a “hog,” but also, any claims that he might have made regarding his masculinity have been, in classic lynching fashion, refuted and ridiculed, held up contemptuously before the eyes and ears of a condemnatory white public. In the courtroom scene that opens and frames the novel, Jefferson’s white lawyer declares:

---

<sup>70</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 229.

<sup>71</sup> Valerie Babb, “Old Fashioned Modernism: ‘The Changing Same’ in *A Lesson Before Dying*,” *Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*, ed. David C. Estes (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994): 262.

Gentlemen of the jury, look at this—this—this boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man. Oh, sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this—this—this a man? No, not I. I would call it a boy and a fool...He does not know the size of his clothes or his shoes...Mention the names of Keats, Byron, Scott, and see whether the eyes will show one moment of recognition...Gentlemen of the jury, this man planned a robbery? Oh, pardon me, pardon me, I surely did not mean to insult your intelligence by saying 'man'—would you please forgive me for committing such an error?<sup>72</sup>

I emphasize here that “hog” is not the only racialized legalese used to publically humiliate Jefferson. Trial transcripts will also show that Jefferson has been called “boy,” “fool,” “it,” “cornered animal,” “thing that acts on command,” “a thing to hold the handle of a plow,” and “not much.” Jefferson, in other words, has been hit with a slew of blatantly racist and derogatory labels from his own defense lawyer. In fact, it is Jefferson's white public defender who most explicitly juxtaposes what he sees as Jefferson's subhumanity/nonhumanity against the normative masculinity of “civilized” white men in the courtroom.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, as with the witness of the severed black male penis during/after the lynching act—often a hands-on exhibition that signified both the mockery and negation of black masculine self-expression—the call for a public notation of Jefferson's unattainable manhood (“Gentlemen of the jury, look at this”) and the language of corporeal dissection that surrounds it (“look at this—this—this boy,” “see whether the eyes will show”) signify racialized exemplary punishment. Even before his wrongful conviction and death-sentencing, Jefferson's very public and racialized

---

<sup>72</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 7, 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 7, 8 7.

degradation is intended to remind trial witnesses that black men, innocent or guilty, must be rendered powerless, voiceless, and nameless in a white supremacist social order.<sup>74</sup>

Jefferson writes against this objectifying and patently racist conception of black male identity when he declares in his diary “im strong” or “im gon stay strong” six times in four short pages.<sup>75</sup> It’s worth noting here that what I see as Jefferson’s accentuation of masculine power is *not* emblematic of his attainment of a normative (read: white patriarchal) manhood in which he would somehow find a way to dominate those who have dominated him. Jefferson, in other words, does not harm his detractors in order to realize the presence of his strength. Rather, he draws strength from his community, from visits made by, for instance, the town’s black schoolchildren, who remind him that he is loved: “lord have merce sweet jesus mr wigin where all them peple come from when you ax me if some chiren can com up here an speak i didn kno you was meanin all them chiren in yo clas...they hadn never don nothin lik that for me before.”<sup>76</sup> Jefferson’s reflection on this particular experience precedes his repeated declarations of strength,

---

<sup>74</sup> My conception of Jefferson’s very racialized and very spectacularized emasculation in this scene of *legal* lynching is indebted to the work of Robyn Wiegman and L.V. Gaither. In “The Anatomy of Lynching,” Wiegman argues that “in severing the black male’s penis from his body, either as a narrative account or a material act, the mob aggressively denies the particular sign and symbol of the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallus and thereby reclaiming, through the perversity of dismemberment, the black male’s (masculine) potentiality of citizenship.” Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 83. Gaither writes that “the lynching of blacks was a means of terrorizing an oppressed group, suppressing their political and economic aspirations, reaffirming and reinforcing their group marginalization from the mainstream of ‘society,’ and it was carried out in pogrom fashioned...eventually the lynching of African Americans became institutionalized within the criminal justice system as a form of ultimate punishment.” L.V. Gaither, *Loss of Empire: Legal Lynching, Vigilantism, and African American Intellectualism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006): 6.

<sup>75</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 231, 232, 233, 234.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 230, 231.

which, I contend, attest not only to the inner calm that Jefferson develops before execution, but also to the way in which he begins to see himself dispelling the myth of his impotence as a black man in a Jim Crow society.

So while Philip Auger is right to argue that “set against [a] white patriarchal prescription for manhood, Jefferson’s writing must be recognized as a radical act in itself,” it is also important to make note of the sentence-level ideological offensive that Jefferson launches against white supremacy in his prison diary.<sup>77</sup> Near the end of Jefferson’s notebook, his insistence “im somebody” and his concluding charge to Grant and his future readers, “tell them im a man” are commanding declarations of how the black community has helped him define a positive self-concept.<sup>78</sup> Jefferson, that is to say, has not only used the introspective engagement inherent in journal-writing to remind himself of who he is and who he isn’t but has also imparted the power of such critical insights to others by insisting that his articulation of his desired self-image—“tell *them* im strong tell *them* im a man”—be imparted to his black community, as well as to the unjust justice system that has facilitated his public degradation.<sup>79</sup> Again, I contend that Jefferson’s “tell *them*” is also intended to serve notice on a racist social order that has mistaken his verbal silence for weakness. Jefferson uses the written word to speak up and speak out about who he is, to defiantly speak back to this white supremacist “them” who Grant has previously emphasized as being the bearers of Jefferson’s official story:

“Jefferson...the white people out there are saying you are a hog, not a man...I want you

---

<sup>77</sup> Philip Auger, “A Lesson about Manhood: Appropriating ‘The Word’ in Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 27.2 (1995): 83.

<sup>78</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 232, 234.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 234.

to show *them* the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To *them*, you're nothing but another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove *them* wrong.”<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, Jefferson's “tell them im strong tell them im a man” reinforces a previous series of statements he makes in his diary regarding his self-recognized capacity for dismantling white supremacist conceptions of his identity. In one of his most intriguing entries, Jefferson writes: “paul...is the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman to people i kno you paul an i kno ole clar an i kno you too shef giry an you mr picho and mr mogan an all the rest of yall i just never say non of this before but i know ever las one of yall.”<sup>81</sup> Here, in a few short phrases he scratches in his notebook, Jefferson transforms himself from one who is fixed and objectified by a disciplinary and racialized gaze to one whose stare actually oversees those who facilitate his legal lynching. Just by what he writes, Jefferson trades positions with those panoptic practitioners of white supremacy on the eve of his execution. While Deputy Paul Bonin is the only white member of jail staff who Jefferson distinguishes as having a genuine concern for his wellbeing (“paul...is the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman to people”), Jefferson's repeated “i kno you,” in which he roll-calls the jail administration and town's white racists, implies his ability to see *them* for who they really are. Put

---

<sup>80</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 191. Along these lines, an observation made by Anne Gray Brown in her reading of Jefferson's prison diary is particularly illuminating: “[Jefferson's] use of the pronoun ‘them’ not only references the people in his emotional circle—his godmother and Tante Lou, specifically—but also those persons who are responsible for proclaiming him guilty and declaring his fate: the all-white jury, and, by extensions, the entire racist system of injustice.” Anne Gray Brown, “Writing for Life: ‘Jefferson's Diary’ as Transformative Text in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*,” *Southern Quarterly* 47.1 (2009): 39.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

differently, Jefferson knows that in his diary he can be the outspoken character witness he is prevented from being in the courtroom and in the jailhouse: Jefferson knows that writing affords him the omniscient perspective, distance, and privacy to pass judgment on the justice system that has passed judgment on him.

Jefferson's prison diary also exemplifies the second element of what I've called a revivifying prisoner abuse narrative: Jefferson clearly articulates his desired self-image in the pages of his notebook. During one of the few extended discussions that Jefferson and Grant share in *A Lesson*, Jefferson expresses for the first time how he wishes to be seen when he shares with Grant that he conceives of himself as approaching his execution with the quiet humility that Christ approached his: "He never said a mumbling word... That's how I want to go, Mr. Wiggins. Not a mumbling word."<sup>82</sup> Jefferson's statement here is—as with the others I've examined—deceptively simple, ironic, and profound. On the one hand, Jefferson indeed leaves this earth like Christ in the sense that he says very little in the moments just before he is killed very violently and very publically by the state. Whereas the dying Christ utters but three words—"It is finished!"—Jefferson offers his rapt onlookers only one more: "Tell Nannan I walked."<sup>83</sup> Yet, just like the Christ he strives to be like as he approaches execution, Jefferson actually does much for those he loves most as he draws ever closer to his martyr's death. The dying Son of Man, in fact, becomes the conduit thorough which Jefferson reimagines the kind of man he desires to be. In his prison diary, Jefferson constructs himself as this

---

<sup>82</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 223.

<sup>83</sup> John 19:30, King James Version; Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 254.

despised and yet dearly beloved Man of Sorrows who demonstrates the strength to love sacrificially while hanging on the cross. Jefferson, I contend, sees himself as the bleeding Christ who disregards his own pain in order to look with compassion on his mother Mary and his beloved disciple John, and offer her much-needed words of comfort: “Woman, behold thy son!”<sup>84</sup>

In one of his final entries, Jefferson writes about how he looks beyond his somewhat similar agony—a wrongful conviction and imminent confrontation with state-sanctioned death—in order to encourage and embrace his elderly godmother, Miss Emma: “i seen nanan at the table i seen how ole she look an how tied she look an i tol her i love her an i tol her i was strong an she...pull me to her an kiss me an it was the first time she never done that an it felt good an i let her hol me long is she want.”<sup>85</sup> I am arguing that while Jefferson assuredly uses the prison diary to contest the racial myth of his intrinsic irrationality and impotence, his journaling practice also helps him to express himself as a Christ-like sacrificial lover—as the kind of man whose desired self-image is not defined by attaining power in white patriarchal society, but rather by giving and receiving love through intentional engagements with a compassionate black community. Jefferson’s transcription of his desired self-image in his diary is thus significant because it radically reimagines possibilities for black male subjectivity. At one level, Jefferson provides a record of who he is that that does not reinforce how he is seen by the justice system—as a mindless and emotionless hog. At another, Jefferson creates an image of

---

<sup>84</sup> John 19:26, King James Version.

<sup>85</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 231.

himself that challenges readers of *A Lesson Before Dying* who have not closely examined his diary to resist thinking of him as a victim of social injustice only. Jefferson, that is to say, discovers and develops into the kind of man *he* desires to be by writing a revivifying prisoner abuse narrative: writing about an impending encounter with unjust execution pushes Jefferson to think beyond those representational traps Keith Clark calls “archetypal depictions of black men as tragic racial victims” so he can come to life in a way that is refreshingly true to his own self-vision.<sup>86</sup>

## V

Just as the hope of Jefferson and Bayonne’s African Americans depend upon his appropriation of the written word, in 1947, African American men, women, and children in Willie Francis’s segregated hometown of St. Martinsville, Louisiana, desperately need Francis to imagine who he and they are and can be in a Jim Crow society that deems them less than human. They, too, need an unlikely hero from their fold to raise their confidence of achieving some measure of social transformation in a white supremacist social order. On the one hand, Francis is a terribly unlikely hero. A painfully shy, stammering teenager, Francis is a black youth who shares the temperament of Gaines’s Jefferson and is, in fact, only a few years younger than him when he is similarly sentenced to death by an all-white jury.<sup>87</sup> Yet when the constitutionality of Francis’s

---

<sup>86</sup> Keith Clark, *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest Gaines, and August Wilson* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002): 69.

<sup>87</sup> Deborah W. Denno, “When Willie Francis Died: The ‘Disturbing’ Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment’s Most Enduring Standards of Risk,” *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 25, 32-33.

resentencing to the electric chair is ultimately upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in January 1947, Francis overcomes his bashfulness, realizing that his moment for speaking up has finally arrived. In his pamphlet, *My Trip to the Chair*, which Francis writes with the help of local resident Sam Montgomery a few short months before his second execution in May 1947, Francis attains radical voice both by the writing act, and by the specific words that he writes.<sup>88</sup> Francis, that is to say, implicitly refutes his presumed illiteracy by writing the pamphlet, but also very intentionally writes into existence his positive self-concept and capacity to empower others at a moment when his re-execution sentence serves as a constant reminder that the state already deems him dead. Francis writes:

This is the first time I ever told [my] whole story and I hope that by at last telling it people will understand what it means to go through what I went through... *I know how it feels to...think I am dead but find out I am not.* I do not like to talk about it at all, but if it will help other people to understand each other, I want to tell everything.<sup>89</sup>

As fate would have it, Francis would be in an especially unique position to “tell everything” about what it meant to be physically *and politically* alive after expected death. Francis’s incredible survival of the electric chair on May 3, 1946, and later,

---

<sup>88</sup> My reading of Francis as author of *My Trip to the Chair* neither dismisses nor over-valorizes Deborah W. Denno’s research:

*The Chair* was written in the spring of 1947 when Willie and a local resident, Sam Montgomery, collaborated to document Willie’s experiences during the first attempted electrocution. The effort was also designed to garner sales to help fund Willie’s Supreme Court appeal. Willie made clear that he agreed to write *The Chair* story on the condition that he not be expected to discuss Andrew Thomas’s murder. While a reader can get some sense of Willie’s personality from the pamphlet, the writing appears edited and formalized by his collaborator, so the extent of Willie’s voice is unclear.

Deborah W. Denno, “When Willie Francis Died: The ‘Disturbing’ Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment’s Most Enduring Standards of Risk,” *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 23.

<sup>89</sup> Willie Francis, *My Trip to the Chair: As Told to Sam Montgomery* (Washington, D.C.: Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, 1947).

widespread allegations of Louisiana’s sanctioning of “cruel and unusual punishment” following the state’s decision to re-execute Francis would earn him national attention during the summer and fall of 1946.<sup>90</sup> As Deborah Denno has observed, for many months after Francis’s tragic first encounter with the electric chair, “people everywhere were entranced by Willie’s survival,” and also by his positive disposition amid the state’s strong push for his second electrocution. For the first time in his life, Francis found himself politically alive. He was propelled into the public spotlight, often writing letters to his advocates to garner their support while his defense lawyer, Bertrand DeBlanc, appealed his case (successfully) to the U.S. Supreme Court. But I contend that Francis had more than legal concerns on his mind as he read and responded to mail from men, women, and children of all races, ages, and social positions. As he answered letters from small-town Christian activists, elderly women, and elected officials (including the then-governor of New York Herbert Lehman), Francis was also immersed in letter-writing as a self-refashioning strategy.<sup>91</sup> I am arguing that Francis appropriated the written word in order to redefine his criminalized body, reconstruct his public identity, and revivify himself and his socially-confined African American community.

We must not forget that like Gaines’s Jefferson, Francis was also a prejudicially-criminalized African American youth who was subjected to—and writing against—a public and racialized discourse of intimidation and humiliation. For instance,

---

<sup>90</sup> Deborah W. Denno, “When Willie Francis Died: The ‘Disturbing’ Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment’s Most Enduring Standards of Risk,” *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 45; Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 147-148.

<sup>91</sup> Deborah W. Denno, “When Willie Francis Died: The ‘Disturbing’ Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment’s Most Enduring Standards of Risk,” *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker (New York: Foundation Press, 2009): 45.

immediately following Francis's miraculous triumph over the electric chair, one of his executioners, a Captain Ephie Foster, sent Francis a resounding death threat in the presence of the execution's attendees: "I missed you this time, but I'll kill you next week if I have to do it with a rock!"<sup>92</sup> Foster's unchallenged warning of extralegal intervention in Francis's execution speaks to the pervasive white supremacist terror and unencumbered vigilante justice that Francis confronted even as he came-to from a near-death experience. Foster, that is to say, was emblematic of the larger Jim Crow society, a society that was ever-ready to reinforce Francis's and all blacks' designated place of economic and political powerlessness in a segregated social structure. As Gilbert King reminds us, after the failed electrocution, Foster and the rest of St. Martinville's white population "believed only more strongly that blacks had to be made continually aware of the grave consequences of crimes committed against whites."<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, Francis's very public, very racialized degradation continued.

Moments later, an onlooker outside the death chamber initiated the town's commentary on Francis's survival by insisting Francis was *still* "a black bastard."<sup>94</sup> In the ensuing days and weeks, national newspapers continued this haranguing, labeling Francis "The Lad Who Cheated the Chair" and "[The] Negro Slayer [Who] Cheats Death."<sup>95</sup> Then, in a futile attempt to evoke sympathy for Francis while appealing his resentencing to the electric chair, Francis's own lawyer, a white man named Bertrand

---

<sup>92</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 28.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

DeBlanc, called him “a beaten animal” in a Southern and (thus) nearly all-white courtroom.<sup>96</sup> I am arguing, then, that as the object of numerous, highly-publicized racial slurs, Francis had to turn to the written word in a manner similar to Gaines’s Jefferson. Initially, letter-writing represented for the semi-illiterate Willie Francis the same opportunity Jefferson seized: writing was a way he could refute the racist and reductive master narratives the state and “literate” public created in order to frame his identity. Like Jefferson, Francis, as prison epistle writer, appropriated the written word in order to demonstrate his unforeseen capacity for critical thought, contest high-circulating, state-produced constructions of his identity, and reinforce his ties to the larger community. Yet it was ultimately in his pamphlet *My Trip to the Chair*, published shortly before his second execution, that Francis offered the strongest counterevidence of his presumed illiteracy, political passivity, and utter isolation.

In *My Trip the Chair*, Francis clearly demonstrates what I have termed the first element of a revivifying prisoner abuse narrative: he dismantles white supremacist conceptions of his identity. Like Jefferson, whose recurrent declarations of strength in his prison diary attest to his communally-shaped, positive self-concept and dispel the myth of his impotence as a black man in a segregated social order, Francis’s affirmations of might in his pamphlet counter the political passivity his white defense attorney (and later the press) unwittingly ascribes to him as he shows an impassive, all-white jury a photo in which Francis is seated in the electric chair he ultimately survives: “Look at him, gentleman, a beaten animal, do you think there was any hope in that brain?”<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 162.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 162.

Francis's description of his walk to the chair suggests that there was indeed hope in his brain at that moment. In fact, Francis's discussion of his walk hauntingly parallels Paul Bonin's testimony of Jefferson's final steps in Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. Paul tells Grant Wiggins: "He was the strongest man in that crowded room [...]. Straight he walked. I'm a witness. Straight he walked."<sup>98</sup> Francis, recounting his walk of death, states: "I tried to walk straight and bravely." Later, he adds: "I tried to hold my shoulders back and walk without anyone helping me...I guess a lot of people thought I was just bragging."<sup>99</sup> Of course, implicit in Francis's observation here is that he was *not* "just bragging." His straight-backed swagger—what Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson might call his "cool pose"—communicate opposition to his designated place of political passivity in Jim Crow society.<sup>100</sup> His posture also demonstrates how much Francis draws strength from the local religious community. While Francis's Catholic pastor is too far away to visit Francis, another Catholic minister, Father Charles Hannegan, comes to see him and assures him that people of faith, in particular, needed Francis to use his walk to the chair as a lesson to them, as a way of teaching them how to die with dignity: "He said I had this one big chance to prove I was able to die like a man." It is thus both Francis's defiant walk, and how he talks about that walk on the page that contest courtroom rhetoric that only served to reinforce his presumed voicelessness and inferiority in a Jim Crow society. Taken together with the words that

---

<sup>98</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 253, 254.

<sup>99</sup> Willie Francis, *My Trip to the Chair: As Told to Sam Montgomery* (Washington, D.C.: Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, 1947).

<sup>100</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992).

he scrawls on the wall of his cell—“OF COURSE I AM NOT A KILLER”—the semi-illiterate Francis’s assertions of unforeseen vitality and communal connection in *My Trip to the Chair* radically dispel the racist myths of his inconsequence (“a beaten animal, do you think there was any hope within that brain?”) and intrinsic criminality (“Negro Murderer”).<sup>101</sup>

Moreover, Francis’s pamphlet is also a revivifying prisoner abuse narrative because, like Jefferson’s prison diary, its author writes into existence his desired self-image. First, Francis refuses to allow his pamphlet to take up the most damning image of himself in public circulation. He explicitly disregards his construction by the state and the press as a “Negro Murderer” who, true to his “nature,” shot an unarmed white man named Andrew Thomas. Francis writes: “I don’t want to talk about the killing of Mr. Thomas. When they asked me to write this story I said I would only [write] if I didn’t have to say anything about that part...I will tell you about the electrocution.”<sup>102</sup> Francis’s statement here, which appears in the second paragraph of his pamphlet, is, I contend, a declaration of his authorial control. Francis makes it very clear from the outset of *My Trip to the Chair* that he will only write about those images of himself that *he* finds worthy of consideration, which are those related to his subjection to and survival of a particularly tormenting execution: “I will tell you *about the electrocution.*” I am arguing that by defining himself as a textual authority within the pages of his pamphlet—by establishing and enforcing boundaries around what images of self he will examine and

---

<sup>101</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 150.

<sup>102</sup> Willie Francis, *My Trip to the Chair: As Told to Sam Montgomery* (Washington, D.C.: Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, 1947).

how he will examine them—Francis simultaneously projects his most fundamentally desired self-image. *My Trip to the Chair*, that is to say, allows Francis the rare opportunity to articulate himself as an author, as one who has the power to do the telling (or not-telling) about himself, his life story, and his ideas: “I will tell *you*.” Francis’s stern refusal to discuss the state’s construction of him as a callous “Negro Murderer” in his pamphlet thus reinforces his earlier, misunderstood attempt at authorship. Previously, Francis insisted that his identity was not reducible to the crime he allegedly committed by inscribing “OF COURSE I AM NOT A KILLER” rather ostentatiously on the wall of his cell (see illustration).<sup>103</sup>

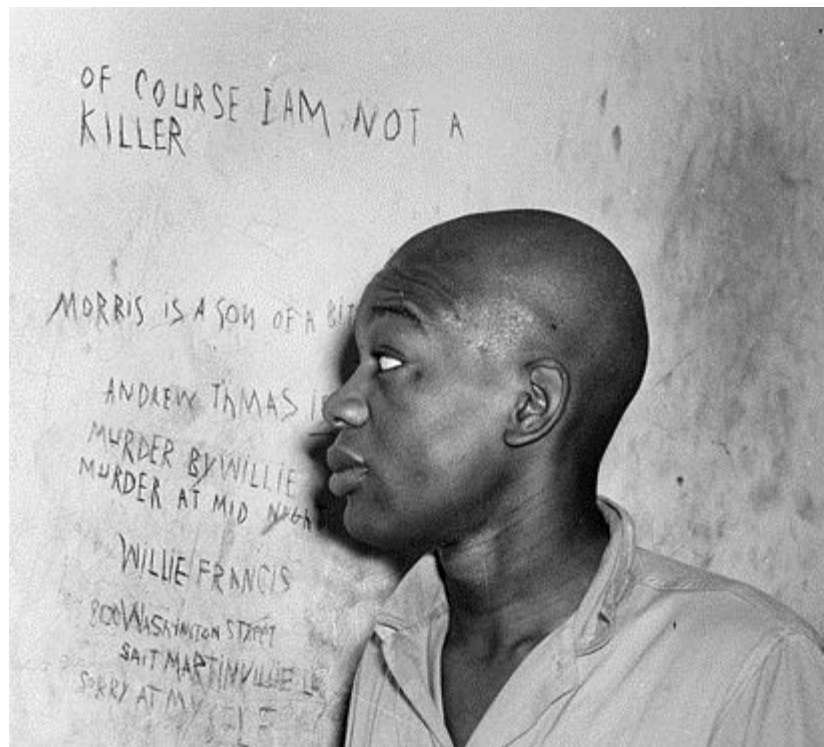


Figure 4.1: Allen, Bill. “Willie Francis, Death Row.” *Associated Press Photo Archive* 4 May 1946 APA4605041120.

---

<sup>103</sup> Gilbert King, *The Execution of Willie Francis* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008): 150. King notes that scholars continue to struggle with the full meaning of this phrase in connection with others on Francis’s wall that would seem to point to his involvement in some kind of encounter—but not necessarily a murder—with Andrew Thomas.

Yet Francis's construction of himself as author is but one way that he writes into existence his desired self-image in *My Trip to the Chair*. He also does this by representing himself as a Christ figure. Like Gaines's Jefferson, who conceives of himself as approaching execution with the silent strength of the falsely-convicted Christ—"He never said a mumbling word... That's how I want to go"—the writing act affords Francis the opportunity to frame his racially-discriminatory conviction and impending death in the context of Christian martyrdom.<sup>104</sup> Though state records show Francis spoke no words before his executioners pulled the switch, Francis's diary reveals the words he *meant* to say: "I was thinking about saying I didn't blame anyone for what they were doing to me."<sup>105</sup> Francis was an especially voracious reader of the Bible, so his appropriation here of the words of Christ in Luke 23:34 is, at one level, unsurprising.<sup>106</sup> But I am interested in just how profoundly Francis's words allude to those expressed by Christ, who, bleeding profusely on the cross, responded with mindboggling compassion toward those who had sentenced him to death, brutally beaten him, and mocked him even in death: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 223.

<sup>105</sup> Willie Francis, *My Trip to the Chair: As Told to Sam Montgomery* (Washington, D.C.: Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, 1947).

<sup>106</sup> In addition to telling *My Trip to the Chair* readers outright that he would read his Bible for hours on end—"I read in my Bible until the sun went down"—Francis also tells readers that he asked to be pictured reading his Bible, and offers them an image of its frequent use: "One day [my father] brought me a Bible my mother gave him for me. It's pretty well worn out now." Willie Francis, *My Trip to the Chair: As Told to Sam Montgomery* (Washington, D.C.: Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, 1947).

<sup>107</sup> Luke 23:34, King James Version.

On the one hand, Francis's statement references Christ's in that his death sentence is also an unjust one. Francis was, after all, coerced by white policemen to write a murder confession, tried before an all-white jury without the benefit of sufficient legal counsel, and sentenced to death despite there being no defined motive to kill and no fingerprints or other incriminating evidence found on the weapon used in the crime. Yet I argue that what makes Francis's allusion here a very deliberate one is that, like Christ, who Gospel writers depict as freely forgiving the very soldiers who nearly flogged him to death *before* his agonizing crucifixion, Francis, writing about his botched electrocution retrospectively, projects an image of himself as forgiving of executioners who would, moments later, not kill but torture him to the point of near-death with electric current. Francis's statement "I didn't blame anyone for what they were doing to me" thus takes on an intentionally hyperbolic, Christ-like significance, especially given what Francis later writes in his pamphlet regarding the awe his minister friend displays when Francis survives the electrocution, receives a death threat from his executioner, and declares: "God is Always good!"<sup>108</sup>

Thus, Francis does not only use the written word to openly reject the state and press's construction of him as a cold-blooded "Negro Murderer." *My Trip to the Chair* also represents Francis's thought-proving depictions of himself as author and Christ figure, as someone capable of critical and compassionate thought. The semi-illiterate Francis, that is to say, by depicting himself in his pamphlet as one who thinks—as one who thinks *for* himself ("I will tell you about the execution") and thinks *beyond* himself

---

<sup>108</sup> Willie Francis, *My Trip to the Chair: As Told to Sam Montgomery* (Washington, D.C.: Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, 1947).

(“if it will help other people to understand each other, I want to tell everything”)—accomplishes a feat similar to the one the unlettered Jefferson realizes in Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*. The prison pamphlet that Francis authors and imparts to the reading public represents nothing less than what Grant Wiggins and Bayonne’s African American community request and receive from Jefferson through his diary: “You can prove them wrong. You can...stand, *and think*, and show [them] the common humanity in us all.”<sup>109</sup> Francis’s *My Trip to the Chair* is also a midnight-hour record of hope, a literary artifact that attests to a death row prisoner’s critical thinking and communal ties. Like Jefferson, Francis uses the written word to dismantle white supremacist conceptions of his identity, write into existence his desired self-image, and serve notice on Jim Crow society that blacks can and do revivify themselves within regimes of racialized subjection like segregation and the criminal justice system—regimes that have historically functioned to funnel blacks toward political passivity and premature death.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown us that Gaines’s characterization of Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying* is indeed haunted by the plight and literary production of Willie Francis. Yet *A Lesson Before Dying* is also instructive for contemporary critical explorations of wrongful incarceration and wrongful execution. Since 1989, 289 former prisoners (disproportionately, men of color) have been exonerated through forensic DNA testing, which is a tool of exculpation that can be used in cases where blood, bone, or hair from

---

<sup>109</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 191, 192.

the crime scene is available.<sup>110</sup> The high number of exonerees in these biological evidence cases alone signifies that our epoch is one in which proof of wrongful conviction, imprisonment, and execution is undeniable and more common than perhaps generally imagined. Yet stories about these travesties of justice are rarely told from the perspectives of those who experience them. On the one hand, death penalty opposition groups like the Innocence Project, the American Civil Liberties Union's Capital Punishment Project, and the Death Penalty Information Center must be applauded for their efforts in helping to absolve the falsely-accused from criminal convictions or making apparent in their literature the racial bias that so often surrounds wrongful incarceration and execution. Such work is rare, urgent, and incredibly impactful, not least because it reveals the irreparable harm that results from the state and free public's endorsement of tough-on-crime laws, racially-discriminatory judicial practices, and capital punishment as a viable penalty for even the most prejudicially convicted men and women. Yet the reports, pamphlets, and online articles that these advocacy groups create and circulate on wrongful incarceration and wrongful execution generally focus more on the ways in which unjustly criminalized persons are viewed by the criminal justice system than how these persons critique such views and the system responsible for their construction.

This is where a work like Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* demonstrates its radical utility.<sup>111</sup> In *A Lesson*, Gaines depicts a semi-illiterate death row inmate who uses

---

<sup>110</sup> For more, please visit the Innocence Project's website: <http://www.innocenceproject.org/know/>.

<sup>111</sup> I imagine Gaines's "Jefferson's Diary" chapter as African American fiction's forerunner to Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's award-winning play *The Exonerated*, Jessica Sanders's award-winning documentary *After Innocence*, and Rickie Stern and Anne Sunberg's award-winning documentary, *The Trials of Daryl Hunt*.

the written word to pass judgment on the racist criminal justice system responsible for his wrongful incarceration and execution, and to dismantle the racially-prejudiced way in which he is viewed by that system. Gaines's literary examination of wrongful conviction, in other words, by taking us into diary entries written by a falsely-accused man, helps us comprehend how a death row prisoner critically resituates how he is seen by a Jim Crow society, court system, and prison administration—as a hog—with how he sees himself: “tell them im strong tell them im a man.”<sup>112</sup> Gaines's novel, that is to say, does not only make evident how a young black male's wrongful incarceration and execution represent the consequences of systemic racial bias and white supremacist terror. *A Lesson Before Dying* also pushes us to see how a falsely-accused man manages to transform his unjust institutional subjection into an opportunity for the attainment of radical voice and reconstituted personhood. Jefferson's diary entries thus contrast sharply with the more conventional narratives of wrongful conviction, which appear as reports authored by human rights journalists at the Innocence Project, the American Civil Liberties Union's Capital Punishment Project, and the Death Penalty Information Center. These narratives tend to be written in objectivist third-person in order to make their content appear more legitimate, or to establish affective appeal for the abused among prospective justice advocates.

Consider, for instance, the Death Penalty Information Center's 2004 report, *Innocence and the Crisis in the American Death Penalty*, written by the Center's executive director, Richard Dieter. On the one hand, Dieter's report, which includes his

---

<sup>112</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 234.

quantitative and qualitative assessments of recent exonerations and provocative criticisms of capital punishment, represents rare and vital critical thought on wrongful incarceration and wrongful execution. Yet I argue that Dieter's thinking would have benefitted greatly from the engaged commentary of several of the black male exonerees whose stories he features. Dieter's way of retelling of one of these exonerees' stories, in light of my previous discussion of how deftly Jefferson dismantles his construction as hog by his defense lawyer, is particularly noteworthy:

[Ronald] Jones was a homeless man when he was convicted of the rape and murder of a Chicago woman. He maintained that he signed a confession only after a lengthy interrogation during which he was beaten by police. Prosecutors described him as a 'cold brutal rapist' who 'should never see the light of day.' But DNA testing revealed that Jones was not the rapist, and there was no evidence that more than one person had committed the crime. The Cook County state's attorney filed a motion asking the Illinois Supreme Court to vacate Jones's conviction in 1997. In May 1999, the state dropped all charges against Jones.<sup>113</sup>

Here, while Dieter superbly makes clear how the criminality of the state precedes and predetermines Jones's wrongful conviction—he writes that Jones “signed a confession only after a lengthy interrogation during which he was beaten by police”—he chooses to emphasize how DNA testing, rather than Jones himself, revealed that he “was not the rapist.” To be fair, DNA evidence is indeed the tool of exculpation in cases like Jones. Yet, Jones's assessments of his construction as a “cold brutal rapist” by prosecutors do not appear in Dieter's report. Unlike Gaines's Jefferson, who, as I previously discussed, brilliantly critiques his construction as hog by his defense lawyer and Sheriff Guidry, we

---

<sup>113</sup> Richard C. Dieter, *Innocence and the Crisis in the American Death Penalty*, September 2004, 16 February 2012 < <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/innocence-and-crisis-american-death-penalty>>.

get no sense of how Jones responds to the state-created image that similarly functions to project his criminality as being somehow tied to his “nature.”

My purpose here is not to criticize Dieter as much as it is to recognize the narrative limitations that arise as a result of conventions specific to the field of human rights literature. As Kay Schafer and Sidonie Smith discuss in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, human rights reporters often edit down or completely elide the stories of falsely-accused men, often reconstructing them in third-person voice so that they appear more valid, or to establish affective appeal for the abused among prospective justice advocates: “Testimonies can be reduced to forensic evidence, denuded of emotion... excerpted and joined to other excerpts to produce corroborative evidence.”<sup>114</sup> Literature, however, as a medium of representation that invested in getting readers thinking about the interior lives of prisoners, helps us to see not only the ways in which the wrongfully-convicted have been viewed by the criminal justice system but also how they have critiqued those views. Literary works, I contend, also help us appreciate how these people who are defined by their alleged crimes redefine themselves through the power of words. Put differently, what Gaines’s Jefferson accomplishes through his diary entries far exceeds his sound dismissal of his status as hog. As jailhouse diarist, Jefferson comes into a fuller knowledge not only of who he is not, but also of who he is, and who he can be—even as Sheriff Guidry refers to him as “hog” month before his execution. Repeatedly, Jefferson sees beyond the iron bars of his jail cell, beyond the prison-house of segregation, and tells us that even in a racist criminal justice system, even in an

---

<sup>114</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 44.

intensely segregated (and therefore racially-repressive) town: “im strong,” “im somebody,” “im a man.”<sup>115</sup> I am arguing that the literary text—in this case, Jefferson’s diary—can help us to see the falsely-accused as so many of them see themselves: as persons whose identities are neither reducible to the state’s framing discourses nor their obvious victimhood. In the end, we must remember that Jefferson’s reminder to Grant, one he voices after writing his first entry, is as much for Grant as it is for his white defense lawyer, the courts, Sheriff Guidry, the fictional town of Bayonne—and for those of us who might make the tragic mistake of reading Jefferson as a victim only: “I’m youman...But nobody didn’t know that ’fore now.”<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 232, 234.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 232, 234.

## Bibliography

- Abu-Jamal, Mumia. *All Things Censored*. Ed. Noelle Hanrahan. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Live from Death Row*. New York: Perennial, 1995.
- “Abuse: guard not prosecuted for sexual attacks.” *Orange County Register*, July 29, 1990.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Al-Ami'n, Rashi'd Qawi'. "I Say Today I Recognized a Slave Ship." *Cell Door Magazine* 5.1 March 2003. 12 March 2012  
<<http://www.lairdcarlson.com/celldoor/00501/Al-Ami'n00501SlaveShip.htm>>.
- Amnesty International. *Broken Bodies, Shattered Minds: Torture and Ill-Treatment of Women*. London: Amnesty International, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *United States of America: Police Brutality and Excessive Force in the New York City Police Department*. London: Amnesty International, 1996.
- Andrews, William. "The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative." *PMLA* 105 (1990): 23-34.
- Auger, Philip. "A Lesson about Manhood: Appropriating 'The Word' in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 27.2 (1995): 74-85.
- Babb, Valarie. "Old Fashioned Modernism: 'The Changing Same' in *A Lesson Before Dying*." *Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Ed. David C. Estes. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994. 250-264.
- Bailey, Anne C. *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.
- Bair, Asatar. Rev. of *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, by Christian Parenti. *Review of Radical Political Economics* 34 (2002): 380-382.
- Baker, Jr., Houston A. "The Embattled Craftsman: An Essay on James Baldwin." *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*. Eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988.
- Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. "The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999. 311-323.

- Baldwin, James. "A Letter to Prisoners." *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis." *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. Ed. Randall Kenan. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Blues for Mister Charlie*. New York: Dial Press, 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Early Novels and Stories*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Dial Press, 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *If Beale Street Could Talk*. New York: Dial Press, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Interview with Herbert R. Lottman. "It's Hard to Be James Baldwin." *Intellectual Digest*. July 1972. 67-68.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *No Name in the Street*. New York: Dial Press, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. New York: Dial Press, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.
- Barnett, Pamela E. "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*." *PMLA* 112 (1997): 418-427.
- Beavers, Herman. "Allegory and Voice in *A Lesson Before Dying*." *Contemporary Black Men's Fiction and Drama*. Ed. Keith Clark. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. 135-154.
- Bernstein, Lee. *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in in Prison in the 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Blackmon, Douglas A. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.
- Block, Diana, Urszula Wislanka, Cassie Pierson, and Pam Fadem. "The Fire Inside: Newsletter of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners." *NWSA Journal* 20.2 (Summer 2008): 48-70.
- Brown, Anne Gray. "Writing for Life: 'Jefferson's Diary' as Transformative Text in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*." *Southern Quarterly* 47.1 (2009): 23-46.

- Brown, Marianne. "Making History inside Prison Walls." *Tenacious* 21 (Fall 2010): 11-17.
- Brown, Vincent. "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery." *The American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 1231-1249.
- Buchanan, Kim Shayo. "Our Prisons, Ourselves: Race, Gender, and the Rule of Law." *Yale Law & Policy Review* 29.1 (2010): 1-82.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Impunity: Sexual Abuse in Women's Prisons," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 42 (2007): 45-87.
- Burton-Rose, Daniel. "Our Sisters' Keepers." *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor*. Eds. Tara Herivel and Paul Wright. New York: Routledge, 2003: 258-261.
- Caster, Peter. *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
- Childs, Dennis. "'You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet': *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix." *The American Quarterly* 61.2 (2009): 271-297.
- Christian, Barbara. "Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something: African American Women's Historical Novels." *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*. Eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 326-341.
- Churchill, Ward and Jim Vander Wall. *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*. Boston: South End Press, 1988.
- Clark, Keith. *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest Gaines, and August Wilson*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- Conniff, Brian. "The Prison Writer as Ideologue: George Jackson and the Attica Prison Rebellion." *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*. Ed. D. Quentin Miller. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005.
- Cusac, Anne-Marie. *Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Restraint Chair." *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor*. Eds. Tara Herivel and Paul Wright. New York: Routledge, 2003. 216-226.

- Daley, Katherine and Carolyn M. Jones. "Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*: Freedom in Confined Spaces." *From Plantation to Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*. Ed. Tara T. Green. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008. 83-117.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: International Publishers, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison." *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*. Ed. Joy James. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998. 74-95.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation." *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*. Ed. Angela Y. Davis. New Rochelle, NY: Third Press Publishers, 1971.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Race, Gender, and Prison History: From the Convict Lease System to the Supermax Prison." *Prison Masculinities*. Eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 35-45.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Writing on the Wall: Prisoners on Punishment." *Punishment and Society* 3.3 (2001): 427-431.
- Davis, Angela and Toni Morrison. "Angela Davis and Toni Morrison: Literacy, Libraries, and Liberation." <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOAYp8yoVA4>>.
- Davis, David Brion. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Dayan, Colin. *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Story of Cruel and Unusual*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007.
- Denno, Deborah W. "When Willie Francis Died: The 'Disturbing' Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment's Most Enduring Standards of Risk." *Death Penalty Stories*. Eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker. New York: Foundation Press, 2009. 17-94.

- Dieiter, Richard C. *Innocence and the Crisis in the American Death Penalty*. September 2004. 16 February 2012 <<http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/innocence-and-crisis-american-death-penalty>>.
- Doyle, Mary Ellen. *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.
- Dubey, Madhu. *Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Ek, Auli. *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Elsner, Alan. *Gates of Injustice: The Crisis in America's Prisons*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006.
- Faith, Karlene. *Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement and Resistance*. Vancouver: Press Gang Press Publishers, 1993.
- Farmer, Melvin. *The New Slave Ship: A Ship That Does Not Sail*. Los Angeles: Milligan Books, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 1997.
- Fraley, Steve. "Slave Ship." *Prison Masculinities*. Eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 57-58.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Inside Stories of the Global American Prison." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 50.3 (2008): 235-242.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The American Prison and the Normalization of Torture." *Torture, American Style*. Ed. Margaret Power, May 2006, 16 December 2011 <<http://www.historiansagainstwar.org/resources/torture/brucefranklin.html>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Foster, Frances Smith. "'In Respect to Females...': Differences in Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators." *Black Literature Forum* 15.2 (Summer 1981): 66-70.

- Francis, Willie. *My Trip to the Chair: As Told to Sam Montgomery*. Washington, D.C.: Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, 1947.
- Freedman, Estelle B. *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981.
- Frieden, Terry. "U.S. reverse policy; drops 'enemy combatant' term." 13 March 2009. 16 December 2011  
<<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/13/enemy.combatant/index.html>>.
- Gaines, Ernest. *A Lesson Before Dying*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Bloodline*. New York: Dial Press, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Interview with the Academy of Achievement. "Interview: Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*." 4 May 2001. 16 February 2012  
<<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/gai0int-1>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Interview with Marcia Gaudet and Darrell Bourque. "A Literary Salon: Oyster/Shrimp Po'Boys, Chardonnay, and Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines." *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*. Eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young. New York: Knopf, 2005. 131-159.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Interview with Dan Stone. "Ernest J. Gaines: *A Lesson Before Dying*." 16 August 2007. 16 February 2012  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blaUxGHeSfo>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Miss Jane and I." *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*. Eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young. New York: Knopf, 2005. 3-23.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Of Love and Dust*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*." *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*. Eds. Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Young. New York: Knopf, 2005. 52-62.
- Gaither, L.V. *Loss of Empire: Legal Lynching, Vigilantism, and African American Intellectualism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006.
- Gardham, Duncan. "Abu Ghraib photos 'show rape.'" *The Telegraph*. 9 May 2009. 26 April 2011  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/5395830/Abu-Ghraib-abuse-photos-show-rape.html>>.
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Goodman, Jr., George. "For James Baldwin, a Rap on Baldwin." *New York Review of Books*. 26 June 1972. 29 October 2011  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-rap.html>>.
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Methodologies of Imprisonment." *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 651-657.
- Gorman, Tessa M. "Back on the Chain Gang: Why the Eighth Amendment and the History of Slavery Proscribe the Resurgence of Chain Gangs." *California Law Review* 85.2 (1997): 441-478.
- Green, Tara T., ed. *From Plantation to Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008.
- Griffiths, Jennifer L. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2010.
- Hames-Garcia, Michael. *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Harris, Trudier. "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*." *MELUS* 5.3 The Pressures of History (1978): 54-66.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Haslam, Jason. *Fitting Sentences: Identity in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Prison Narratives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.
- Heiner, Brady Thomas and Ariana Mangual. "The Repressive Social Function of Schools in Racialized Communities." *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons*. Ed. Joy James. New York: Palgrave, 2000: 222-229.
- Henderson, Carole E. *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989: 16-37.
- Holland, Sharon Patricia. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Holloway, Karla. "A Prison Library." *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006): 75-89.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
- Hudson, Nick, Bob Lilal and Andrew Strong. "Private Prison Scandals from Texas." *Considering A Private Jail, Prison, or Detention Center?: A Resource for Community Members and Public Officials*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 16 September 2009. 28 December 2010  
<<http://www.grassrootsleadership.org/Texas%20resources/CPI%20Second%20Edition.pdf>>
- Human Rights Watch. *No Equal Justice: The Prison Litigation Reform Act in the United States*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Shielded from Justice: Police Brutality and Accountability in the United States*. 1 July 1998. 29 October 2011  
<<http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/reports98/police/uspo99.htm>>.
- Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union. *Custody and Control: Conditions of Confinement in New York's Juvenile Prisons for Girls* (New York: Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, 2006).
- Human Rights Watch Women's Project. *All Too Familiar: Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. State Prisons*. Washington, DC: Human Rights Watch, 1996.
- Iloeje, Azubike. "The Dimensions of Captivity in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*." *Black Culture and Black Consciousness in Literature*. Ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu. Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Education Books, 1987: 187-196.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001.
- Jackson, George. *Blood in My Eye*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1970.

- James, Joy. *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*. Ed. Joy James. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- James, Joy, ed. *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*. Ed. Joy James. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Warfare in the Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Plume, 1990.
- Jones, Gayl. *Eva's Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.
- Kann, Mark. "Penitence for the Privileged: Manhood, Race, and Penitentiaries in Early America." *Prison Masculinities*. Eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 21-34.
- Kenan, Randall. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. Ed. Randall Kenan. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.
- King, Debra. *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008.
- King, Gilbert. *The Execution of Willie Francis*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2008.
- Kupers, Terry. Introduction. *From the Bottom of the Heap: The Autobiography of Robert Hillary King*. By Robert Hillary King. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009. 15-23.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Mental Health in Men's Prisons." *Prison Masculinities*. Eds. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001: 192-197.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Role of Misogyny and Homophobia in Prison Sexual Abuse." *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 18 (Fall 2010): 107-130.
- Kurki, Leena and Norval Morris. "The Purposes, Practices and Problems of Supermax Prisons." *Crime and Justice* 28 (2001): 385-424.
- Larsen, Doran. "Toward a Prison Poetics." *College Literature* 37.3 (2010): 143-166.

- Law, Victoria. *Invisibility of Women Prisoner Resistance* <<http://zinelibrary.info/files/invisibility%20of%20women%20prisoner%20resist%20zine%20FINAL.pdf>>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*. Oakland: PM Press, 2009.
- Lawston, Jodie Michelle and Ashley E. Lucas, eds. *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011.
- Lee, Min S. *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison: In Which a Utopian Scheme Turns Bedlam*. New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1973.
- Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- Lowe, John ed. *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- Lyon, Janet. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Maestretti, Danielle "Breaking Free: Prisoners Publish Their Stories in Zines." *Utne Reader*, March-April 2010 <<http://www.utne.com/Media/Breaking-Free-Prisoners-Publish-Their-Stories-in-Zines.aspx>>.
- Majors, Richard and Janet Mancini Billson. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books, 1992.
- Mann, Eric. *Comrade George: An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- McDowell, Deborah E. "Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom—Dessa Rose." *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Eds. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989: 144-163.
- McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Knopf, 2010.
- Mears, Daniel P. *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Supermax Prisons*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2006.

- Miller, D. Quentin. "'On the Outside Looking In': White Readers of Nonwhite Prison Narratives." *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*. Ed. D. Quentin Miller. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005. 15-32.
- Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paradise*. New York: Plume, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sula*. New York: Vintage, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Interview with Marsha Darling. "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *Women's Review of Books* 5 (March 1988): 5-6.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Site of Memory." *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West. New York: New York Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990: 299-305.
- M.S. "Abu Ghraib Torture Began at Home." *The Fire Inside* 28 (Summer 2004) <<http://www.womenprisoners.org/fire/000511.html>>.
- Ogletree, Charles. *The Presumption of Guilt: The Arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Race, Class, and Crime in America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Olney, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography, and Literature." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990: 148-174.
- Olson, Lynne. *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.
- Oshinsky, David. *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: Free Press, 1996.
- Parenti, Christian. *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*. New York: Verso, 1999.
- Pawlacyzk, George and Beth Hundsdorfer. "Amnesty International Calls for Quinn to Enact Reforms at Tamms." *Bellville-News Democrat: BND.com*. 3 September 2009. 18 December 2009 <<http://www.bnd.com/600/story/907644.html>>.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Trapped in Tamms: In Illinois' only supermax facility, inmates are in cells 23 hours a day." *Bellville-News Democrat: BND.com*, 4 August 2009. 18 December 2009  
<<http://www.bnd.com/600/story/865377.html>>.
- Pens, Dan and Paul Wright, "The Resurgence of Chain Gangs." *The Celling of America: An Inside Look at the U.S. Prison Industry*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998): 70-77.
- Perkinson, Robert. "Shackled Justice: Florence Federal Penitentiary and the New Politics of Punishment." *Social Justice* 21.3 (Fall 1994): 117-132.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire*. New York: Picador, 2010.
- Philip, M. Nourbese. *Zong!* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Porter, Horace A. *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*. Middletown, CT; Wesleyan University Press, 1989): 12.
- Rafter, Nicole Hahn. *Partial Justice: Women, Prisons, and Social Control*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990.
- Rathbone, Cristina. *A World Apart: Women, Prison, and Life Behind Bars*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- Raynaud, Claudine. "The Poetics of Abjection in *Beloved*." *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. Eds. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: 70-85.
- Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Penguin, 2007.
- Rhodes, Lorna A. *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Sargent, Andrew. "Representing Prison Rape: Race, Masculinity, and Incarceration in Donald Goines's *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief*." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 35.3 (2010): 131-155.
- Sasson, Theodore. Rev. of *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, by Christian Parenti. *Punishment and Society* 3 (2001): 547-550.
- Schaffer, Kay and Sidonie Smith. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. New York: Palgrave, 2004.

- Scott, Lynn Orilla. *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002.
- Sekora, John. "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative." *Callaloo* 32 (Summer 1987): 482-515.
- Shaylor, Cassandra. "'It's Like Living in a Black Hole': Women of Color and Solitary Confinement in the Prison Industrial Complex." *New England Journal on Criminal and Civil Confinement* 24 (1998): 385-416.
- Smallwood, Stephanie. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Smith, Brenda V. "Sexual Abuse of Women in United States Prisons: A Modern Corollary of Slavery." *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 33 (2006): 571-608.
- Smith, Justin E.H. "Making Sense of the U.S. Prison Industry." *Radical Philosophy Review* 8.1 (2005): 83-96.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Snyde, Craig W. "An Old Fashioned Hog Slaughter." *Mother Earth News*. 1 September 1982. 16 February 2012  
<<http://www.motherearthnews.com/Sustainable-Farming/1982-09-01/An-Old-Fashioned-Hog-Slaughter.aspx>>.
- Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81.
- Stanford, Anne Folwell. "Lit by Each Other's Light: Women's Writing at Cook County Jail." *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States*. Eds. Paula C. Johnson, Martha L. Raimon, Tina Reynolds, and Ruby C. Tapia. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010: 165-177.
- Suggs, Jon-Christian. "Iron City: Race and Revolutionary Romanticism Behind Bars." *Legal Studies Forum* 25 (2001): 449-458.
- Sweeney, Megan. "Racial House, Big House, Home: Contemporary Abolitionism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Meridians, Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism* 4.2 (2004): 36-63.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

- Talvi, Silja J.A. *Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.
- Tapley, Lance. "Torture in Maine's Prison." *The Portland Phoenix* 11-17 November 2005. 12 March 2012  
<[http://www.portlandphoenix.com/features/top/ts\\_multi/documents/05081722.asp](http://www.portlandphoenix.com/features/top/ts_multi/documents/05081722.asp)>.
- Thompson, Carlyle Van. *Black Outlaws: Race, Law, and Male Subjectivity in African American Literature and Culture*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.
- Travis, Molly Abel. "Speaking from the Silence of the Slave Narrative: *Beloved* and African-American Women's History." *Texas Review* 13 (1992): 69-81.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir. Rev. of *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, by Christian Parenti. *Theoretical Criminology* 5 (2001): 108-109.
- Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1976.
- Wallace, Maurice. *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985.
- Wideman, John Edgar. *Brothers and Keepers*. New York: Mariner Books, 2005.
- Wiegman, Robyn. *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Williams, John A. *Clifford's Blues*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1999.
- X, Malcolm. *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*. Ed. George Breitman. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

## Biography

Patrick Elliot Alexander was born in Youngstown, Ohio, on July 29, 1983. He graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts in English/Creative Writing from Miami University of Ohio in 2006. During his graduate career at Duke University, Alexander published a review of Caleb Smith's *Prison and the American Imagination* and Regina Kunzel's *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* in *American Literature*, and a review of Jennifer Griffith's *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance in Obsidian*. His article, "'To live and remain outside of the barb[ed] wire and fence': A Prison Classroom, African American Literature, and the Pedagogy of Freedom," is forthcoming in *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy*.

Alexander is also the recipient of several fellowships and awards, including the Katherine Goodman Stern Dissertation Fellowship, the Franklin Humanities Institute Dissertation Fellowship, the Graduate School Summer Research Fellowship, and the Samuel DuBois Cook Award. He received the Cook Award for serving as the primary literature instructor for Stepping Stones, an academic enrichment program that he co-founded with the Orange County Literacy Council in 2007. Through Stepping Stones, Alexander has designed and taught five college preparatory seminars in African American literature for postsecondary students who are imprisoned at Orange Correctional Center in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Alexander will begin an appointment as Assistant Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of Mississippi in Fall 2012.